

## Study of Japanese Sensitivity to Surrounding Information on Photo-Haiku 写真俳句における日本人の周辺情報への敏感さの研究

David McMurray

### Introduction

Educational and psychological research on the ways culture influences how we look at, and interpret, photographs are supported by this current study which uses haiku to measure viewpoints. This study adds to the increasing number of research studies which suggest that Westerners and East Asians literally see the world differently (Hall, 1989; Masuda and Nisbett, 2001; Gutchess, Welsh, Boduroglu, and Park, 2006; Iyengar, 2010). Culture does affect the way the participants in this project perceived the world through photographs. And what they saw in the photos determined how they interpreted the world and wrote about it.



Figure 1. Christmas market

When you look at figure 1 above, where do your eyes linger longest on the photograph? The answer to that question might differ depending upon where you were raised. Here is an example of a poem from an American who interpreted this photo. The individualistic culture could have inspired the idea that man can overcome the limitations of science and perhaps one day we might be able to clone snowflakes. In the next haiku a Canadian-American poet zooms in on a loved one determined to overcome death itself.

Christmas market  
a little boy looks  
for matching snowflakes  
\*\*\*  
her last Christmas  
at the market her heart's desire  
dark plums in Brandy

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Here are examples of the quintessence of photo-haiku by two Japanese participants who pictured life from the cultural point of view of collectivists. They drew ideas from the edges of the photograph or from faraway thoughts.

Lively market  
gaze of benevolent statue  
Christmas in peace

\*\*\*

Clean crisp air  
brings back an old memory  
with a loved one

They perfectly described the abstract convergence of real life into art form, of image into words, and of photography into haiku. Seemingly without notice, the harmonious scene of Christmas with a loved one was transformed into the austere form of a written text message. Real life moved into the medium of text. These 4 samples explained the way culture influences our brains to process visual information differently into written text such as haiku.

## **1. Issues Taken Into Consideration**

*A priori*, I wanted to test whether Japanese people write haiku about what they see and feel in nature around them differently than Westerners. I believed that American perceptions tend to focus on salient foreground subjects, especially in photographs taken in America on American themes. I hypothesized that culturally specific patterns of attention may be organized into a similar group based on the perceptual environment of North Americans and Europeans. If that were proved true, then it could also mean that Japanese are more inclined to focus on contexts and the backgrounds of photographs. It was hypothesized that this culturally specific pattern of attention might be the perceptual environment of the Japanese culture as well as other Asian cultures. I took part in a contest to invite people from around the world to view 12 diverse scenes. These photos were shown to participants who were asked to compose haiku in English about the photographs. Among the photographs were distinct American or Japanese scenes. Scenes from Asia and Europe were also included.

## **2. Previous Research Related to Cultural Interpretation of Photographs**

I reviewed seminal literature from the disciplines of education and psychology as well as intercultural studies and comparative literature. Kim and Sherman (2007) studied the role of culture in shaping social behaviors such as the effect of self-expression on choice. They addressed the implications of culturally specific cognitive, affective and behavioral tendencies for educational outcomes. Kim, who is from South Korea, found her research inspiration in her experience as an international graduate student in the United States. In her

graduate seminar classes, her inclination was to listen quietly and absorb what was going on around her-but she felt pressured to speak up. She questioned whether the process of talking is valuable for all students or just some students. Kim and Sherman (2007) tested European-American and Asian-American students by giving them a problem to solve. Control-group members solved the problem silently, while members of the experimental group had to talk out loud and explain their reasoning as they worked. Kim found that European Americans who talked out loud solved the problem just as well as those who stayed silent, but being forced to talk seriously undermined the Asian students' performance. The study concluded that Asians may think and reason rather than speak while solving as Westerners do. When Europeans talk aloud, they vocalize their thoughts, but Asian Americans-on top of solving the problem-have to translate their thoughts into words. Perhaps this would prove to be the same when Asians have to write in English about a photo.

A study by Masuda and Nisbett (2001) suggested that participants look at and describe a photograph differently based on their culture. When presented with a photograph of an aquarium, Japanese participants tended to describe the environment and background of the scene, whereas Americans described a school of the largest fish as the important subject. These differences were further borne out when the same participants were shown several variations of the initial photograph and asked to describe what had changed and which elements they still recognized. The Japanese outperformed the Americans in describing disparities in the background elements. The Americans were particularly adept at recognizing the large fish wherever they appeared, whereas the Japanese had difficulty recognizing them if the fish were placed in a different environment. For the Japanese, the environment dominated, interacting and influencing the characters. From the American viewpoint, the large fish were the crucial actors in the scene, influencing everything else around them. Masuda and Nisbett (2001) pioneered indications that East Asians, more than Americans, explain events in writing with reference to the context.

In the field of Intercultural Studies, Iyengar (2010, p. 54) believed "these results suggest that culture is an important factor in shaping our ideas about who or what exercises control in a specific situation." When the abstract experimental conditions are applied to real-life situations, people tend to understand what they see according to their culture. This can in turn affect how people choose. People are likely to perceive choices at the level suitable for them. Culture affects an individual's own perceptions of choice and their desire to choose, as well as the way people actually choose.

### **3. Methodology**

Cultural studies undertaken to date have identified variations in physical eye movements, descriptors, and the testing of memory. By identifying gaps in this existing literature on cultural differences about the ways people look and react to photographs, this study formed new hypotheses. To test the hypotheses, a unique testing instrument was added to the commonly employed photographs to support a methodology to reconcile findings between cultural groups. The additional instruments were short written responses in the form of haiku poetry. To conduct a comparative study of Japanese and Western perceptions, it was considered worthwhile to utilize photographs plus haiku poetry as testing instruments. Photographs are easy to take with cell phone cameras and haiku can be written in just a few words. Photographs are universally shared and haiku

has become very popular and is written in English around the world.

As research instruments, photographs and haiku are simple, yet they uniquely demonstrate how the concepts of high-context culture and low-context culture can describe cultures based on how explicit the messages exchanged are and how much the context means in certain situations. Depending on the poet, haiku can be written as vague messages, or haiku can be composed explicitly. Depending on the poet-photographers' viewpoint, certain specific parts of a photograph can be employed or a general feeling can be interpreted.

According to Hall (1976), messages exchanged in a high-context culture carry implicit meanings with more information than actually spoken parts, while in low-context cultures, the messages have a clear meaning, with nothing implied beyond the words used. In a higher-context culture, the way words are said is more important than the words themselves, so many things are left vague or left unsaid, relying on the context of the moment and the culture as a whole to impart meaning. In a lower-context culture, it is important for the communicator to be explicit in order to be fully understood.

Social photos, like those on Snapchat, try to capture the experience of the moment, the thoughts of the person making the snap. Photographs function in their traditional roles as documentary proof, as art, and as aids to our memories. Yet we're increasingly seeing the world not just as something to freeze and capture, but as something to talk with. When the photo is as important as its context, the experience is different, and the moments are remembered or forgotten as such. We share and talk with experience as we feel it. Photos are made into stories. Photo-haiku as art, as literature, as well as a medium of communication has attracted the attention of amateur and world-class photographers and poets. Their work allows us to see the world through their eyes. Their vision is framed within their own shot as an aesthetic unit and when the work re-emerges in the new guise of a photograph plus a haiku the interplay of image and text creates a new flavor, a new sensation, a new experience of reality. The photo-haikuists' energies, memories, experiences, and beliefs can all emerge from the dark room of the mind. Photo-haiku can be considered a form of meditation. A Zen-haiku poet does not look at an apple, but looks as an apple. Interpenetration is the key, emptying the mind and entering into the photographic experience in a blissful state - literally stepping into the photographic landscape or image in order to step out of oneself.

Source data was obtained during a 6-month period in 2017 from participants from 42 countries around the world who entered 3,571 works to the 7th Setouchi Matsuyama International Photo-Haiku Contest. To prove the hypotheses 1,484 photo-haiku in the English language were analyzed.

#### **4. Observed Results**

A diverse range of haiku was able to be classified into two groups according to whether the haiku focused on the background objects or foreground subjects in photographs. The participants each viewed a series of 12 photographs and were asked to compose haiku about them. The photographs vary, and objects in the foreground or background of the images differ. The objective of this investigation was to discover if written responses varied between the groups of Japanese haikuists from those of other countries. Here are representative examples of photographs and matching haiku.

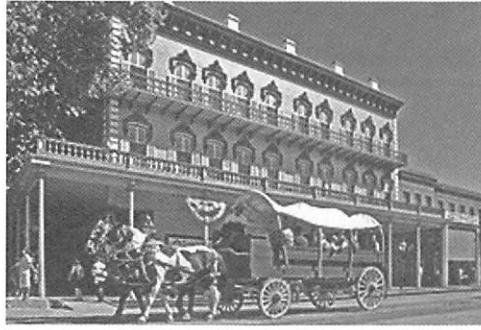


Figure 2. Sacramento Hotel in Photo 1 in the contest by Asahi Culture Center

When you look at figure 2 above, where do your eyes focus on something interesting to write about? The answer to that question might differ depending upon where you were raised. Americans stare more fixedly at the covered wagon in the center, while Japanese tend to let their eyes roam more around the entire picture, according to the research I conducted.

Here are examples of responses from the American participants. The Americans were comfortable writing about this photograph that is representative of American cultural heroes, the individuals who conquered the Wild West. The writers zoomed in on the wagon and then looked for the person who could control nature.

covered wagon tour

cell phones point

to the past

\*\*\*

bright sun, blue sky...

the wagoner swats at

a horse-fly

\*\*\*

Past revisited

in a covered wagon ride

Old Sacramento

When a Japanese haikuist observed this photograph he connected the courtyard just out of view on the far left of the photograph with the clear blue sky in the background on the far right.

elderly lady

never moved in the small courtyard

high autumn sky



Figure 3. Kumamoto Castle in photo 9 in the contest by Asahi Culture Center

In all, 132 Asian and Western writers selected photo 9 in the contest to write about (Figure 3). An Indian poet looked to the far reaches of the photograph (Figure 3) to compose this haiku. He ignored the tree and foreground areas.

dawn to come  
silence of the hill, breaks  
into castle

India is a society with both collectivistic and individualist traits. The collectivist side means that there is a high preference for belonging to a larger social framework in which individuals are expected to act in accordance to the greater good of one's defined in-group(s).

The Japanese poets searched the scene for seasonal effect as follows.

The autumn color  
People love  
Gingko nut castle  
\*\*\*  
castle photograph  
beautify pink days  
my childhood comes back

American writers focused on the castle and the powerful people who might have been connected to it in history.

castle on a hill  
monument to feudal lords  
history preserved  
\*\*\*

stone on stone--  
the dreams of men  
scattered in time



Figure 4. Photograph of the City of Taipei.

In all, 76 participants from Japan and Western countries chose to write about the photograph of a tourist rickshaw in Taipei. American, Australian, and Canadian participants viewed a photograph (Figure 4) of a rickshaw in Taipei and wrote the following fairy-tale like stories with a hero and heroine.

leading the street parade  
bicycle rickshaw  
princess in turquoise  
\*\*\*  
park wedding  
he takes her home  
in his cycle rickshaw

The Japanese participants in this study looked to the edges of the photograph, the crowds of people, and the market. Their views were reflective of a collectivist culture.

Many people go  
They want to go to aim place  
They go destination  
\*\*\*  
Shopping street  
Wrapped  
in vibrant people.



Figure 5. Photograph of Hokki-ji in Nara

American and Canadian poets zoomed to the center of the photo of people walking in front of the Buddhist temple (Figure 5). Here is an example from a Canadian, followed by a poet from New Zealand.

mists and snow  
blur the tiki  
someone sports a red umbrella  
\*\*\*

on the road to Hoki-ji  
father recites Ryokan  
son grasps falling snow

The Japanese haikuists heard the sounds of the photograph. For example, poets from a collectivist culture wrote as follows to describe the snow and the panoramic scenery.

the ring of a bell  
descending in the piled snow--  
silent temple town  
\*\*\*

Beautiful white snow  
A temple seems cold and it's being done  
The fantastic scenery

In more collectivistic cultures, people are loyal to their inner group by birth, such as their extended family and their local community. Japanese are experienced as collectivistic by Western standards and experienced as individualist by Asian standards. Japanese might be more private and reserved than most other Asians.



## 5. Results

Countries considered to be individualistic cultures included the United States, Germany, Ireland, South Africa, and Australia. Collectivistic countries included Japan, China, Taiwan, Venezuela, Guatemala, Indonesia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and India.

Individualist cultures promote a strong narrative about the power of individual action to change the world, and even control the environment. In this experiment, the majority of Americans looked at photographs as if there was only one central target. For the Japanese, haiku focused on the background scene with no discernable target object. This occurred even when a distinct target object, such as a rickshaw was placed against a meaningful background such as a busy marketplace. Westerners' perceptions tended to focus on salient foreground subjects, whereas the Japanese and other Asians were more inclined to focus on contexts. When 12 photographs in Japan were shown to a global audience, the Japanese scenes may have been more ambiguous and contained more elements than American scenes. Japanese scenes thus may encourage perception of the context more than American scenes.

Collectivist cultures encourage people to think about control in a holistic way. The individual is not powerless, but he is one player in the drama of life. For the Japanese, nature is not controllable rather man is subservient to its force. The Japanese phrase *shikata ga nai*, meaning it can't be helped, is widely used by people coping with adverse circumstances or unpleasant duties. In the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, the god Krishna tells the hero Arjuna, "You have control only over your actions, never over the fruit of your actions."

In a higher-context culture such as Japan, the way a few words are composed in haiku may be more important than the words themselves, so many things in haiku are left unsaid, relying on the context of the moment and the culture as a whole to impart meaning. In a lower-context culture such as American, it was important for the haiku writer to be explicit, or to rely on common metaphors in order to be fully understood.

Context is a very important concept in culture and photo-haiku. Context is the place where a photo is filmed and a haiku is written. Photographer-poets allow us to see the world through their eyes and through their minds. Their vision is framed within their own shot, as an aesthetic unit but when the work re-emerges in the new guise of a photo-haiku the interplay of image and text creates a new flavor, a new sensation, a new experience of reality. The energies, memories, experiences, beliefs of two art forms emerges from the dark room of the unknown.

People who live in some cultures perceive and think about the world in ways that are very different from those who live in other cultures. Western perceptions are generally analytic. Westerners tend to focus on a central object, for example a person, with respect to which the individual has some goal. Asian haikuists tend to respond less strongly to changes in the foreground of images than those of their Western counterparts. I suggest this difference was due to an increased emphasis on the background, or context, of images in some Asian cultures.

Japanese and North Americans literally view the world differently. When looking at photos, Americans and Canadians focused less on background and context when they composed photo-haiku. This research found that a majority of Americans focused on the foreground object. Results suggested that American cultural experiences directed their creative writing activity on focal objects in the photographs. Analysis of the haiku

composed for this study allowed exploration into how people's cultural backgrounds affected their most basic cognitive processes: categorization, learning, causal reasoning and even attention and perception.

The haiku penned by Japanese and Asians, whose more collectivist culture promotes group harmony and contextual understanding of situations, was composed in a more holistic way. They pay attention to all the elements of a scene, to context and to the relationships between items. Western culture, in contrast, emphasizes personal autonomy and formal logic, and so Westerners are more analytic and pay attention to particular objects and categories.

## **6. Conclusions**

Observations on how Japanese participants looked at and wrote haiku about photographs in this study suggest that culture affects the way haiku poets see the world. Participants who wrote haiku in reaction to viewed photographs were categorized according to those who focused on background images and context or those who put priority on foreground images and individuality. Cultural differences showed correlation to the way Japanese and Western poets perceived photographs.

What we see determines how we interpret the world, which in turn influences what we expect of the world and how we expect the story interpreted from seeing a photograph to unfold. Culture can shape our view of the world, and the results of this study suggest that culture may shape the way our brains process visual information into written text such as haiku.

This research was original in its focus on how culture may have affected the way a sample of participants looked at photographs of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese scenes and interpreted what they saw into haiku poetry. Although Japanese haiku is itself a form of culture, international haiku is also regularly composed in English in at least 44 countries. Culture seemed to profoundly affect the way a majority of participants perceived 12 photographs taken around the world. And what they saw decidedly determined how they interpreted the world around them. The results of this study suggest that culture does affect the way these haikuists saw the world. The active convergence of photography and haiku resulted in synergetic art forms.

Japanese participants paid attention to the background of a photograph taken in Japan more so than American poets and many other Westerners. Some photo-haikuists added elements unseen in the frame of their camera viewfinders. Others helped viewers to feel, hear, smell, and taste what had been experienced. Unique phrases and poetics were crafted to emphasize the focus and lines in their photos.

The Japanese and American participants in this study literally did view the world differently. When looking at photos, Americans and participants from other low-context cultures focused less on background and context when they went about composing a poem to describe what they felt. A majority of Japanese and other participants from high-context cultures seem to have been influenced more by the background of photos when they composed photo-haiku. An effective way to engage students of English as a Foreign Language more deeply with the cultural content of classes is through the use of photographs and images. Unique and engaging lessons using visual stimulation that appeals to differing cultural viewpoints can be enhanced through the use of photo-haiku.

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