

Japanese and Western Perspectives on Time in Haiku

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Introduction

Time is an integral aspect of human life. Culture influences the way humans schedule and organize time. Hall (1983) compared the ceremoniousness of the Japanese to knowhow-driven Americans. This cross-cultural study adds to the growing body of evidence that the experience of time is culturally dependent.

The examination of cultural metaphors and proverbs about time is an effective way to understand different temporal issues across cultures. The adage “time is money,” for example, is tied to individuals from industrialized societies who perceive time as something that can be spent, invested, and wasted. The proverb “time flies like an arrow” illustrates the American concept that time moves backwards and forwards, and from left to right. The Japanese concept of *ikigai* relates to finding purpose and joy in everyday life. Haiku focuses on a moment in everyday life. This study explores Japanese and Western perspectives on time by reading the haiku they write. Haiku was used as a research instrument. Results indicate that it is possible to differentiate a culture by the way its individual members compose haiku to frame references to time.

1. Questions that Guided this Study

The hypothesis guiding this research posits that Japanese perceptions differ from those of Westerners when they compose haiku and photo-haiku about time. If that is true, then antecedents for these cross-cultural differences in temporal perceptions can be uncovered to explain why Japanese and Westerners write about time differently. Different values, religions, languages, natural climates, social and economic conditions are inherent cultural factors within cultures that rise to the fore when haiku are crafted. If haiku can describe how different cultures perceive different aspects of society, haiku can possibly illustrate the abstract concept of time.

2. Seminal Studies on Cross-cultural Concepts of Time

Cultural theories about time contain conceptual elements, subjective constructs. Hall (1983) inspired anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists to examine constructs to explain the divergent ways in which cultures view time. Gannon, Locke, Gupta, Audia, and Kristof-Brown (2005) defined and examined divergent temporal orientations across cultures, including pace of life, monochronicity and polychronicity, past, present, and future orientation, use of clock time and event time, and cultural metaphors.

2.1 Concept of Pace of Life

The experience of time is universal. Time controls the daily lives of people in developed and developing countries (Levine & Norenzayan, 1999). Werner, Altman, and Oxley (1985, p. 14) defined the pace of life as

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“the race, speed and relative rapidity or density of experiences, meanings, perceptions and activities.” Examining the pace of life in 31 countries, Levine and Norenzayan (1999) found that Japan and Western European countries had the fastest pace of life. The U.S., Canada, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong ranked middle. Non-industrialized countries were the slowest. How much someone believes they can control the pace of life and control nature may also explain why people perceive and approach time differently across cultures.

2.2 Concept of M-time

The concept of monochronic time (M-time) identifies cultures that view time as linear and separable, and divided into units. M-time cultures therefore emphasize doing one thing at a time. Monochronic individuals wait until one event is over before beginning the next one. Western cultures emphasize schedules, punctuality, and preciseness, and a monochronic sense of time as money may overshadow interpersonal relationships. M-time cultures include the United States, Germany, and Scandinavia.

2.3 Concept of P-time

In contrast, Polychronic time (P-time) cultures view time as naturally reoccurring, and therefore emphasize doing many things at one time. P-time cultures focus more on the naturally occurring flow of time. Time isn't wasted because multiple goals can be completed at the same time. Polychronic individuals consider time to be fluid and malleable, and as a result are able to adapt and go with the flow. P-time cultures focus on human interactions. Time spent with others is a task that helps build bonds that may be useful in the future. Collectivist cultures tend to be polychronic. A polychronic person is good at multi-tasking, and prefers to work on multi-tasks and interact with other people. Japan, Middle Eastern, South Asian countries, and Native American cultures tend toward a polychronic sense of time.

2.4 The Past, Present, and Future

M-time correlates to a strong future orientation and the notion of P-Time implies present and past orientations (Ko & Gentry, 1991). Collectivism and individualism can also explain why people perceive and approach time differently across cultures. Past-oriented societies include China, Britain, Korea and Spain. Collectivist cultures such as Japan tend to be more present-oriented and focus on current events and the “here and now.” Collectivism and Individualism points of view were shown to have an effect on how 1,206 individuals attended to context and background when looking at photographs to compose photo-haiku haiku. Haiku samples were identified by McMurray (2020) from collectivist Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Venezuela, Guatemala, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina. Shirai and Beresneviciene (2005) found that individualistic cultures in Western countries (Canadians, Americans, and Northern Europeans) tend towards being future-oriented. Individualists focus more on abstract events and universal rules that apply across situations. Countries considered to have individualistic cultures that affected the way haikuists intuitively responded to a photograph to write haiku were identified by McMurray (2020) as the United States, Canada, Germany, Ireland, South Africa, and Australia.

2.5 Concept of *Ikigai* and Self-Fulfillment

Mitsuhashi (2018) noted that the Western concept of life's purpose, including the French concept of *raison d'être*, implied self-fulfillment during one's lifetime. More so than in one's immediate everyday life. Hasegawa (2003) claimed that Japanese people believe that the sum of small joys in everyday life results in a more fulfilling life as a whole. The Japanese word *iki* translates to life, and *gai* describes value or worth, can be combined to form *ikigai* meaning to find joy in life through purpose. Other Japanese compound words for shells, *gai*, are also associated with value. The word *hatarakigai*, means the value of work, and *yarigai ~ga aru* implies it's worth doing it. In Japan, the concept of time in the term *jinsei* refers to a lifetime, and *seikatsu*, means everyday life. The concept of *ikigai* aligns with *seikatsu*.

In both urban and rural areas of Niigata Prefecture, self-rated levels of health, intellectual activeness, and social roles, were associated with having *ikigai*. In rural areas, the family structure was strongly associated with having *ikigai*. In cities, the hospitalization experience of men was strongly associated with *ikigai*. For these individuals, *ikigai* is what gets them up every morning and keeps them going.

3. Methodology

This study employed haiku as a research instrument on 1,700 participants. Participants freely composed haiku on any theme. Those related to time were categorized and analyzed.

3.1 Haiku as Testing Instruments

As research instruments, haiku are simple, yet they uniquely demonstrate the concepts: pace of life; monochronic time; polychronic time; past, present, or future time; and *ikigai*. For both Westerners and Japanese alike, haiku is akin to a photograph or painting. Poets use imagery to paint a picture with words. It is suited to focusing on one scene, one key image, or one central metaphor.

3.2 Participants

To prove the hypothesis under the conditions of this study, haiku in the English language related to time were analyzed. The data were sourced from 1,700 haiku freely submitted on postcards or email from individuals in 47 countries to the *Asahi Haikuist Network* column in the *Asahi Shimbun* between February 1 to July 31, 2020. During this period many of the participants were at home, often in self-quarantine, due to Coronavirus measures. Participants were free to choose any topic. As editor of the haiku column, I was able to assess all of the English language submissions and correlate them to country (McMurray, 2020).

4. Observations

Examining cultural metaphors and proverbs about time can be an effective way to understanding different temporal issues across cultures. Through haiku, it may also be possible to describe the culture and its frame of reference.

4.1 Perspectives on Pace of Life

Accepting that time passed slowly during his childhood in Lagos, Nigeria, Taofeek Ayeyemi composed this haiku.

unfolding a letter—
kids counting the fowl prints
in the mud

In the midst of the new coronavirus crisis in Tokyo, Kazuo Takayanagi moved at a snail's pace.

gardening during my stay home
a snail
taking it slow and easy

Nearing Vancouver Island in Canada, American educator Charlie Smith was eager to disembark and move faster to his goal. He wrote while on vacation, inspired by First Nations people artwork of killer whales, ravens and a huge wooden bear eyeing a carved salmon.

slow ferry
destination in view
totem poles

Preferring a fast-pace lifestyle, Anne-Marie McHarg mocks herself for only plodding along in London, U.K.

Languid
In the heat of day
Tortoise slow

Germans were found to be better than Japanese at slowing down after work, or adapting to situations that prevented them from doing work (Levine & Norenzyan, 1999). As an example to support this claim, Lothar M. Kirsch happily extended his time away from work in Meerbusch, Germany. Unable to catch a ride, the German postponed beginning work, the next event in his life.

After the holidays
Succeeding
Not getting the train

Meik Blottenberger lives in Pennsylvania Amish country—settled by Germans since the 1720s, it is the

oldest such community in America.

thoughts of Tokyo
my niece wins gold
for speed texting

Ramona Linke, a poet in Germany, remarked on the fast-pace of courting among young people.

speed dating
the young magnolia strewn
with blossoms

In the data, there were many examples of haiku written about the Japanese perception that nature is not controllable. Satoru Kanematsu remained confined at home, accepting his fate believing there was nothing he could do against the force of nature. He nonetheless shared his sense of frustration. This poem reflects how the COVID-19 crisis doubled down on the writer's perception of passing time. As another example, The Japanese writer was jealous of the busy bees, focusing on them until he was lulled to sleep by their mantra.

COVID rain
a cancelled meeting
haikuists
* * *

High noon beat:
buzzing bumble bees
come and go

Specifically, individuals from large urban areas tended to write about faster paces of life than did haikuists in suburban or rural areas. Forced to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Meghan Elizabeth Jones' life had never been slower in Calgary, Alberta.

always indoors
life slowed in fear
empty hands

Sheila K. Barksdale reported that "lockdown restrictions have been loosened somewhat in England" and she felt lucky to have a small garden in Gotherington where "neighbours all have low fences so we can still chat over the fence." Facing a trying time in Wells, U.K., Helen Buckingham had just enough energy to hand in a pithy haiku.

stricken bee
the neighbor phones her son who mostly knows
what possums do
* * *
paw by paw
goin' nowhere
slow

Italian writer Angela Giordano gently pulled her satin drawstring thinking about how to pass the time by pleasing her lover.

under the wisteria—
I untie the purple ribbon
to please you

Artur Lewandowski missed the long peaceful afternoons in Sieradz, Poland, when people gathered in front of a small chapel to pray and sing to the Virgin Mary. Teiichi Suzuki kept social distancing in mind when going for a walk in Osaka.

assembly ban
only a nightingale sings for Mary
in the wayside shrine
* * *
Gathering
in the cluster of
wisteria

4.2 Perspectives on M-time

Shelley Krause is an educator in Princeton, New Jersey who, like monochronic individuals in American culture, will wait until one event is over before beginning the next one.

rain at the window—
I ask my mother
how long it will last

Sue Colpitts impatiently waited for a four-legged pedestrian to hurry across an aptly named street near the center of Peterborough, Ontario.

Park Street
a black bear
jaywalks

Rose Mary Boehm lives near the Pacific Ocean in Lima, Peru. Her haiku demonstrates her resistance to M-time pressures.

I cannot recall
Racing through life without thought
Ocean waves soothe me

Helga Stania entertained at her apartment in Ettiswil, Switzerland. A longtime resident of Japan, Paul Faust was delighted he stayed on the veranda in Ashiya, Hyogo Prefecture. Tiffany Shaw-Diaz swooned sniffing *Jasminum officinale*, commonly called poet's jasmine, in Centerville, Ohio, where it can be seen growing on house decks. Lilia Racheva regretted having stayed outdoors too long in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Hanami
on the balcony
the old couple
* * *
unexpected sight
miniature blossoms bloom
bonsai on the porch
* * *
taking a few
extra breaths
fully bloomed jasmine
* * *
careless whisper,
under the old sour cherry—
family reunion

4.3 Perspectives on P-time

Polychronic individuals consider time to be fluid and malleable, and as a result are able to adapt and go with the flow. India is a polychronic culture whose people tend to change priorities depending on their importance; attitude towards punctuality are in flux. Neither Vandana Parashar in Panchkula, India, nor Benedetta Cardone in Massa, Italy, respectively, were ready to face a long evening of confinement.

rain clouds
the child in me refuses
to hurry home

* * *

too soon to walk back—
afternoon roaming
in the streets

The fear of coronavirus infection urged Neena Singh to send haiku from Chandigarh, India, she said, “It’s been a long break ... as I lost my friend Angelee Deodhar (1947–2018) who had motivated me to pen haiku.”

Spring bounty—
rose blooms welcome
bees, butterflies

Lakshmi Iyer penned this one line of poetry while her day floated by in the southern Indian state of Kerala: in its aroma, lazy butterfly takes off. Madhuri Pillai relented and let her flowers go with the flow. In doing so, however, she lost a favorite.

old home
I let the wisteria
have its way

* * *

neighbour’s envy
the blue hydrangea
dies on me

American poets typically viewed time horizontally in a backward to forward manner, and time moved from left to right. Aileen Cassinetto, the San Mateo Poet Laureate, worked with a group of writers including Garry Gay who composed the next haiku to evoke the historic formal gardens of Filoli in Northern California, which closed due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This poem shared a way forward.

daffodil garden
a path into the sunshine
with a bumblebee

According to Cooperrider and Nunez (2009), Chinese writers typically viewed time as moving vertically

from bottom to top. Used to multi-tasking, and a Chinese concept of time, John Zheng taught college classes online to keep in touch with students.

Hanami—
a long look up
from the window

4.4 Perspectives on The Past, Present, and Future

Western culture is very future-oriented, constantly focused on what needs to be done and by when, in order to keep moving on and to be the most productive. Venelina Petkova is a jurist for the 16th World Haiku Contest for Children, organized by JAL Foundation.

through a mask
I articulate
the coming of spring

The Eastern Europeans tend to see the present through the eyes of the past. For example, D.V. Rozic relived his past flower children generation in Croatia, while fearing the future of another attack from the pandemic.

the second great wave ...
my teenage rebellion
rewilded

Considering patience a virtue, Murasaki Sagano looked back on better days in old-time Tokyo.

Spring patience
missing tea parties
old-age friends

Natalia Kuznetsova hopes to discover a new sky in Moscow.

new shades of life
for the new decade ...
divorced

An American, Lauris Burns doubled down and criticized a late bloomer in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Love like spring blossoms
Worn and enchanting by fall
Was it worth the wait?

In confinement away from the pandemic, haikuists have undertaken new activities, such as making dolls, gardening or placing their hands together in prayer. Consistent with the idea that Native American cultures tend toward a polychronic sense of time, John Daleiden revealed what he learned from the Pueblo peoples about the bean-planting season in the Sonoran Desert. Pat Davis admired the past when time moved to a slower beat in Pembroke, New Hampshire.

Katsina dolls—
brightly clothed images
of The People
* * *
in the time
of grandfather's garden ...
the rhythm of these tools

4.5 Perspectives on *Ikigai* and Self-Fulfillment

Sipping her manager's favorite brand of tea, Masumi Orihara recalled a bitter moment at work in Japan. During a Buddhist funeral rite, Murasaki Sagano compared the ephemeral life of a lotus blossom to a hardworking salaryman in Tokyo.

Sweet sour day
under hardworking boss
always rosehip tea
* * *

Lotus bloom
the short span of life
for him too

A Singaporean writer, Elancharan Gunasekaran shared his perspectives on a moment that defined his life. It is a moment in which he realized why he wants to stay alive.

slow dance
red pink petals and spring winds
i live for this

A Canadian writer and a health-care professional, Elizabeth Gibbs literally seized the day in Calgary.

street protests
coronavirus deliciously calls out
carpe diem

Multi-tasking at home in Sebastopol, California, Paul Geiger kept one eye on the oven door while the other watched the stovetop.

kitchen timing
biscuits done
gravy not yet

When haikuists focus on the present moment, they can keenly observe and record the impact of social distancing on our changing perceptions of time. Lysa Collins observed subtle changes taking place when the community of White Rock, British Columbia, closed its roads and waterfront promenade. A Canadian, Meghan Elizabeth Jones looked the other way.

silent street—
old man with the empty bowl
begins to cough
* * *
while we wait
another cup of tea
ignoring a cough

5. Discussion

This research provided a fascinating look at the perception of time during COVID-19. Haikuists from 47 countries around the world shared stories about how they passed a moment of their time. Participants were free to choose any topic to write, however, because of the effects of home isolation their perceptions of time came to the fore. While some haikuists seemed happy to be spending more time alone or with family, others wrote in frustration. Some haikuists wrote that they had lost track of time, they had forgotten what day of the week it was. Haiku after haiku, time after time, the psychological process of changing behavior equated to an expected cultural response.

Why did the haikuists who participated in this current study perceive of time differently? Finding the answer benefited from the work of Fulmer, Crosby and Gelfand (2014) who determined the antecedents to temporal orientations by identifying cultural values, social structure, and language, as well as the effects of environmental factors such as natural climate and social and economic conditions.

Though the two concepts of M-time and P-time have strengths and weaknesses, proponents of these views sometimes clash. Polychronic individuals may view monochronic concepts as inefficient and narrow-minded.

Haiku can remind people of the preciousness of the present moment. Japanese haikuists, however, rarely illustrated a special once in a lifetime incident. Haiku by Japanese writers was considered best when it focused on a moment of time in everyday life. Japanese culture focuses on the transient moments of daily life.

6. Conclusion

Haiku can describe how different cultures perceive different aspects of society, and an abstract concept such as time. The concept of time being money appeals to individuals from monochronic industrialized societies who perceive time as something to spend, invest, or waste. The concept of time as an empty void that needed to be filled was found in many of the haiku. The concept that humans travel from one event to the next appealed to people who run on what is called event-time.

6.1 Uniqueness of this Study

Individual participants from around the world shared perspectives on how they passed a moment of their time. Such cultural metaphors provide a valuable lens to reveal unique perspectives of culture on time. The haiku by Japanese and Western haikuists in this study illustrated their sense of time.

This study employed haiku as a unique testing instrument. The photo-haiku was analyzed in a previous study on cultural context (McMurray, 2020), however the hypothesis and methodology in this current study were original. This research focus on how culture may have affected the way a sample of 1,700 participants wrote haiku about time. Although Japanese haiku is itself a form of culture, international haiku are composed in English in at least 47 countries around the world. The results of this study suggested that culture did affect the way these haikuists perceived time.

6.2 Why this Research Matters

This kind of research can help readers to understand interactions between members of different cultures.

The timing of this research was concomitant to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of self-isolation on the participants may lead to a relatively permanent change in behavior.

6.3 Future Research

Instead of focusing on a single culture at a time, or cross-cultural comparison, it would be beneficial to try to understand more about how individuals from different cultural backgrounds compose haiku and photo-haiku to relate to each other. Building on this current body of research, future directions for research could also include the impact of COVID-19 on cross-cultural temporal orientations.

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