

## Matsuo Basho's Influence on Haiku

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This article probes Matsuo Basho's (1644 – 1694) grip on modern haiku and reflects on how haiku enthusiasts pay tribute to his teachings. The relevance of the master poet's artwork and words continue to be rediscovered to this day. A recent news report (Laflamme, 2022) thrilled haiku aficionados when these Chinese characters on an old scroll caught the eye of an art dealer: 芭 (ba) and 蕉 (sho). When he unfurled the piece, it revealed rows of shimmering calligraphy interspersed with paintings in a loose, almost naive style. It was a masterpiece by Basho.

### Hokku, Haiga, and Haiku

Basho never wrote haiku. He wrote *hokku*, the opening three-line, 17-syllable stanza of a longer linked verse called *renga* that was collaboratively composed by several poets. He also painted *haiga*, a painting that accompanied and incorporated the aesthetics of a brush-stroked poem. Late in the 19th century, the hokku began to appear as a completed poem on its own rather than function as an opening verse. At that time, Masaoka Shiki coined the term *haiku* to describe these short poems that continued to use the three-line 17-syllable structure.

To analyze how Basho's drawings and writings have affected the way haiku is composed today is a rather difficult subject to deal with. To prove the relativity of the way haiku is composed, hokku by Japanese master Basho are cited incisively. It is hypothesized that the authoritative experience of nature by Basho was similar to a sage who can embody the experience of deep insight. Barnhill (2004) claimed that "We can look to the experiences of great poets of the past as guides for what can and should be experienced when we see a bird, tree, or scene today. These authoritative aesthetic experiences can be codified in literary conventions" (p. 10).

### Haiku Contests Held at the Basho Memorial Museum

Data for this study were collected when the winners of the Basho Memorial Haiku Contest were announced on October 12, 2021 and October 12, 2022, Basho's death anniversary. To prevent the possible spread of coronavirus, the contest in 2021 was reported in newspapers and online websites. In 2022, when the pandemic was more in control, the winning contestants were invited to appear at the Basho Memorial Museum in Ueno Park near Ueno Castle in Iga City, Mie Prefecture. The museum houses Matsuo Basho's work and runs events and contests in his honor. It is a popular memorial site for haiku enthusiasts (see Figure 1). I noted these reports and took part in the international haiku contests.

Haiku written by Matsuo Basho were studied to provide a longer historical perspective of climate and geographical change. Modern haiku composed by debutant and veteran poets for contests and the comments

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made by scholars who have been contributing to haiku writer blogs and to the *Asahi Haikuist Network* column in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper were collected, selected and used in this study. The online newspaper provides readily accessible archived issues that contain over 20,000 haiku and 1,000 pages of analysis and comments in the “From the notebook” section.

### **Observations and Analyses**

Haiku topics today are out of kilter from hokku penned in the past. This is what Blyth (1949) meant in warning that “there is the danger of reading into the verse meaning which the age had not attained to” (p. 337). Some parts of Japan continue to be lucky enough to have four distinct seasons, though in Akita Prefecture where Basho once traveled, the spring and autumn seem to last shorter than before; whereas, the winter and summer are much longer and harsher. So long as there are four seasons in Japan, haikuists would likely continue to follow the season words that Basho used (Uedo, 1992). But the times and global climate conditions are changing.

A historical comparison of language change can be inferred by observing when Matsuo Basho visited Kisakata on the west coast of the Tohoku region in 1689 (Barnhill, 2005). He viewed a shoreline as beautiful as Matsushima Bay on the Pacific side and penned: *yuubare ya sakura ni suzumu nami no hana*.

*Clearing at evening—  
cool under the cherry trees  
blossoms on the waves*

The lovely Kisakata Bay was completely filled in by an earthquake that hit in 1804. Over a century after Basho’s visit, Kobayashi Issa revered it in 1811 with this haiku: *kisagata o naku-nakushi keru kirigirisu*.

*Crickets cry  
as they lose it all—  
Kisakata*

Thankfully, Matsushima narrowly escaped being destroyed by a March 11, 2011, earthquake, and resulting tsunami and nuclear meltdown.

The landscape of *Kisakata* on the west coast of the Tohoku region (on the Sea of Japan) can be better appreciated when contrasted with works on the east coast. It can be argued that the cause of these earthquakes was geothermal and not manmade, but man’s current pursuit of oil by fracking methods has induced earthquakes. Fracking, a drilling process that injects millions of liters of water, sand and chemicals under high pressure into a well, cracking the rock to release natural gas and oil, can cause earthquakes and tremors (BBC News, 2018). Because global warming is shortening spring, haikuists may have to dare to coin new seasonal references such as fracking.

Bynon (1977) coined the study of language change as “historical linguistics.” (p. 1). Traditionally, scholars

studied just the origins of language and the overall differences in the sounds of the language through the ages. From the early 20th century up until our present time, most language changes have taken place at the level of syntactic change, the meaning of words and sociolinguistics (Bybee, 2010). The haiku example below contains these elements. Coining haiku that includes phrases such as “meltdown” are achieved by combining an understanding of traditional Japanese thinking with an accepted modern English format. For many haikuists in Tohoku such as Yutaka Kitajima--the words radiation leaks and meltdown (from nuclear meltdown) have been codified among spring season words (McMurray, 2015).

*Eastern wind--  
radiation leaks  
in silence*

Haiku pedagogy inspired by Matsuo Basho is applied in diverse learning environments. Basho's haiku teaching is often quoted as mindfulness training (Wawrytko, 2013). A banana tree planted beside the hut where he lived inspired his haiku name: Basho (Figure 3). It was a simple tree which he apparently cherished because he wrote in his travel journal “Being completely useless as wood for building, it never feels the ax” (Wawrytko, 2013, p. 145). Matsuo Basho (1966, 1985) also brush-stroked a flower and wrote this three-line verse:

*There beside the road,  
A hibiscus and a horse  
Has chewed it all up*

What is striking about his haiga, a sketch-poem, is how the painting differed from the poem. There is no horse to be seen. Instead the focus is on the hibiscus which is about to disappear. Leon Zolbrod (1982), a scholar and translator of Japanese literature and history, offered this detailed description of the painting that allows us to visualize its aesthetics:

The overall composition has grace and simplicity with the barest minimum of color—pale rose and a dark olive that borders on gray. The calligraphic text at the top runs from the upper left toward the lower right, the reverse of the normal right to left pattern. The line of vision moves from the lower right to upper left, from where the text brings it back toward the center to an imaginary point, or boundary, between text and picture. The seal impression is placed slightly aslant, emphasizing the symmetry of asymmetry, an established aesthetic principle in East Asian painting and calligraphy. A few deft strands of grass in the lower right-hand corner introduce a contrastive element. Parallel as a common everyday image to the horse, which is mentioned in the verse but is not represented in the picture (cited in Wawrytko, 2013, p. 237).

To motivate haiku pedagogy on the campus where I study haiku, I invited a group of Australian poets to visit the International University of Kagoshima. They had been to see the Yamadera Basho Memorial Museum

collection. It is a modestly-sized but expertly presented museum that affords an intimate glimpse of the great poet's life and writings. The aims I have for my own international haiku class are 3-fold: (1) to introduce students to the fascinating paths in which haiku has spread around the world, (2) to encourage them to compose their own haiku in English at *Asahi Haikuist Network* and (3) enlist their support for putting haiku on the UNESCO list of intangible world heritage.

The Australian haikuists' journey took them from Tokyo to Yamagata, heading north in Basho's footsteps, never travelling far on any day. Basho's journey, which covered a far greater distance, ended in Ogaki six months after he had set out, at which point his journal concludes. But it is worth noting that, although travelling in dangerous times, Basho spent more than two and a half years on the road before returning to Edo (Tokyo) in 1691.

When I introduced my class of international haiku students to Beverley George (2016), the past president of the Australian Haiku Society, the students read some of her Basho inspired poetry (Figures 5 and 6). This haiku by George won the Kusamakura International Haiku Competition, held in Kumamoto. It was directly inspired by Basho.

*tsunami dreams*

*grass pillows for the homeless*

*on Basho's narrow road*

The invited guests from Australia shared stories with the Japanese students of how they sat at Basho's fire, walked in summer grasses where he wrote of soldiers' dreams, and saw his cloak and pilgrim hat. They suggested it was a great privilege for all visitors – both Japanese and non-Japanese. These words penned by Basho as he set off on his journey *Oku no Hosomichi* continue to inspire journeys, especially through rural Japan:

*"I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind – filled with a strong desire to wander."*  
(Matsuo Basho, 1985, p. 53).

*Summer moon–*

*light echoes across*

*the canyon*

After the above haiku was first published (McMurray, 2016) it was widely republished and appeared online at several places such as the Akita International Haiku Network, Daily Haiku-Haiga, and Triveni Haikai India. In a review of the haiku on Charlotte Digregorio's blog, Paul Beech commented; "And I hear echoes of Basho in this haiku of David McMurray's! Brilliant. With its bold artwork and stunning verse, this haiga from David McMurray is truly compelling." Donna Bauerly said; "What a marvel of synesthesia!" Synesthesia is the experience of hearing music, but seeing shapes: The experience of one sense through another.

Other comments included Marcie Wells: "I like the mix of senses in this one - light echoes is very beautiful." Nani Mariani commented: "I could feel the reflection of LIGHT in the canyon." Kanji Dev suggested: "The combination of imagery and sound in this haiku is quite haunting!" The steep walls and the bouncing echo made the hairs on my spine stand on end. The results are amazing.

The above summer moon haiku was originally published in *A Hundred Gourds* and was inserted alongside Beverley George's (2016) article "In the footsteps of Basho: small group travel in Japan with a focus on Japanese literature" (p. 2). Unlike Basho, who burnt moxa on his shins to give him strength, haikuists today travel by comfortable coach. Her pilgrimage started from the site of Basho's small hut with a banana tree beside the Sumida River, given to him by his pupils. Basho's name was Matsuo Kinsaku. His *go* (pen-name) came from that of a plant, a type of plantain, that did not bear fruit but whose broad leaves shredded in the wind. Basho likely drew a personal parallel with this and the single life of a wandering poet.

The Australian group comprised haiku poets and a travel writer. All were avid readers. Several were first time visitors to Japan. By the end of their journey, every traveler had felt moved to express some impressions of their journey in haiku, and several also in haiga.

*Basho museum  
watching and listening  
the ripples widen*

The above haiku was penned by David Terelinck, Biggera Waters, Queensland while on visit to Japan to see the Basho memorials.

*my feet  
too small to fit  
Basho's sandals*

The above haiku was penned by Jo Tregellis, Cooranbong, New South Wales while on visit to Japan to see Basho memorials.

Within the far broader framework of learning about Japanese culture, by enjoying its nutritious, exquisitely presented food, sleeping in traditional Japanese inns as well as western hotels, and visiting an onsen (communal hot bath) many haikuists nonetheless focus on the places to which Basho travelled in 1689 and where he wrote many of his memorable haiku.

### **My Own Travels Overland**

Reflecting today on my own poem that had been penned years ago in my dusty travel diary, I noticed that it had been printed all lower case letters:

*summer moon  
light echoes across  
the canyon*

To write this summer moon haiku, I first experienced a haiku moment when I walked quietly through a red desert canyon in the hidden ancient city of Petra, Jordan. I was returning from a late afternoon visit to a sandstone tomb on June 30, 1988, during an overland world tour that I planned and took to go see to the Seven Wonders of the World from April 1, 1988 to September 1, 1990. Readers might have seen the fictionally-named canyon of the crescent moon featured in the movie “Indiana Jones” released on May 24, 1989. At that time I don’t think I had been influenced from what I had read from Basho, but it was inspired by a dusty journey.

Below is a haiku that I wrote which was clearly influenced by reading Basho.

*The swan family  
having stayed longer this spring...  
return to Russia*

On October 12, 2022, this haiku won the grand prize in the English section of the 76th Basho Memorial English Haiku Contest. Mr. Hidetake Kawarachi, a councilor of the Haiku Association and an auditor of the International Haiku Exchange Association, selected and judged the Japanese translations. Iga City, known as the hometown of Basho Matsuo, solicits haiku poems every year in conjunction with the Basho Festival, and this year there were approximately 34,000 submissions from Japan and overseas. Of these, the English haiku category received 1,690 haiku entries from 35 countries, the largest number so far.

As I was writing this haiku, I had a bright, sunny and warm morning in my mind. The haiku I made is a 5-7-5 haiku, a haiku that makes me feel nostalgic for the pleasures and challenges of taking a long journey. It also represents packing up after a vacation and preparing the family to go home together.

I was also inspired by the fool in “King Lear” who said: “Winter’s not gone yet, if the wild geese fly that way” (Act 2, Scene 4). He warns that if the winds of change don’t blow and “history repeats itself ... it follows that the same fatal mistakes will be repeated sooner or later.”

This contest is sponsored by the city of Iga, the hometown of haiku master Matsuo Basho. The Basho Festival, which was held for the 76th time in 2022, has become an autumn feature of Iga, a town of culture and history. Iga Province was a castle town of the Todo clan in a basin surrounded by mountains on all sides. Basho was born in this area in 1644, when the era was changed to Shoho on December 16th. When he was a child, he became interested in haikai, which was popular in Iga, and learned it from his senior haiku poets. In his late teens, he was apprenticed to the Todo Shinshichirō family, a 5,000-koku vassal general of the Todo clan of Iga, who had a great reputation for writing.

This haiku won the 75th Basho Memorial English Haiku Contest Grand Prize published at the Basho Memorial Museum:

*sharing a futon  
in temporary shelter  
snow-covered windows*

As I was writing this haiku, I had a cold, quiet night in my mind. The haiku I made is a 5-7-5 haiku, a haiku that makes me empathize with a family that had lost everything but their lives. I thought of the homeless and disaster victims, and tried to show how many people are flocking to the evacuation center. It also depicts a family warming up while using the futon together while the snow is piling up by the window.

On October 12, 2021, this haiku won the grand prize in the English section of the 75th Basho Memorial English Haiku Contest. Hidetake Kawarachi selected and judged the Japanese translations.

After Basho died, every year in Iga-Ueno, people who admired the goodness of the old man gathered to celebrate the death of the old man. In 1947, the name of a local festival known as *Shigure-ki* was changed to *Basho-sai* in order to honor the great achievement of Basho, who established the popular poetry that is now called haiku in the history of Japanese poetry. Since then, the Basho Festival holds ceremonies and various other events throughout the city centering on Ueno Park and the Basho Memorial Museum.

Based on my experience of winning two back to back grand prizes, I suggest that there are 10 criteria for writing English haiku in the same spirit as Matsuo Basho. They are: creativity, tradition, lines, length, theme, grammar, aha!, joy or sorrow, reality, and grace.

## Conclusion

In this article, it was shown that Matsuo Basho has influenced the writing of haiku and how climate change has changed haiku. Yet composing haiku won't change that reality—nor is it likely to change the minds of those who don't believe that the global warming phenomenon is real. This personal reflection has therefore attempted to contribute to efforts to safeguard haiku for future generations by registering it on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. This paper will perhaps help to analyze the effects of global warming on the calendar of seasonal words used by haikuists to compose poetry. Culture is not a legally defined entity for purposes of UNESCO recognition of intangible culture, yet I believe that it can be inferred that nature and culture are not separate (McMurray, 2015). Writing and literature are human expressions. The tracks made by sparrows in the snow, or the hoof prints left in the dirt by a deer can be compared to human expressions via writing and literature.

When scientific information such as place and date, genus and species, or climate and temperature are recorded alongside haiku it will be easier for future generations to understand the changes in the complexity of the natural world and its relation to culture. Some haikuists report that their morning routines include checking not only the weather forecasts but also information about radiological dosage in the air, the diffusion of PM 2.5, yellow dust and cedar pollen.

Haiku represents a joyous meditation on words, climate, landscape and the relationship between them. Climate change and its concomitant global warming effects is changing the words with which haiku are written, but not necessarily its form. This shortest form of poetry that was inspired by Basho and is now

composed around the world gains its power from seasonal references. It is a world treasure that requires safekeeping and nurturing for future generations.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Matsuo Basho Memorial Museum in Iga City, Mie Prefecture

Note: the museum is designed to appear as Basho wearing a hat and cloak

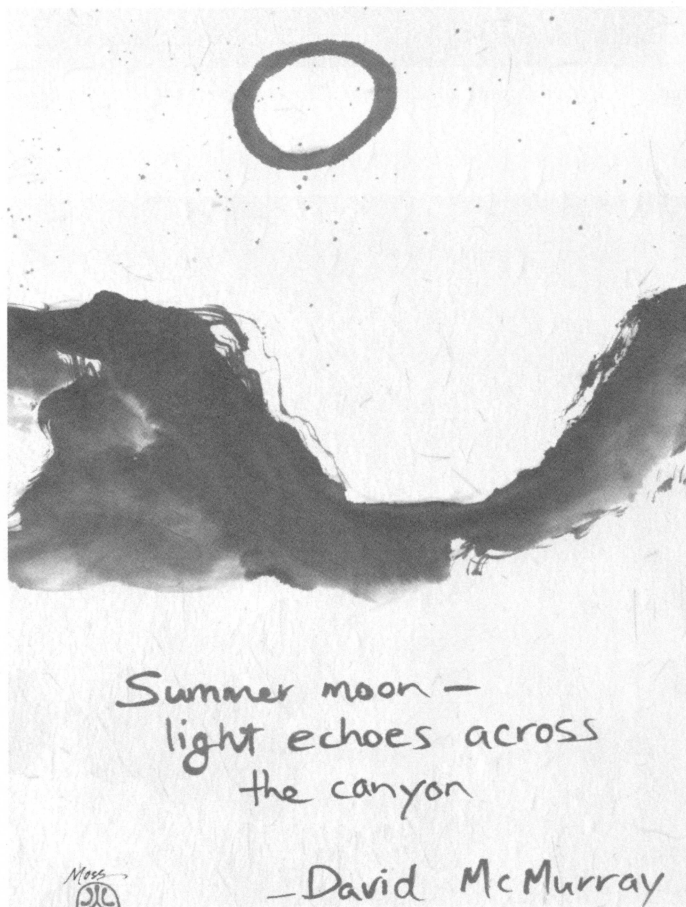


Figure 2. A haiga is a combination of an ink brush sketch and haiku



Figure 3. Matsuo Basho planted banana leaves in front of his hut Basho-an.

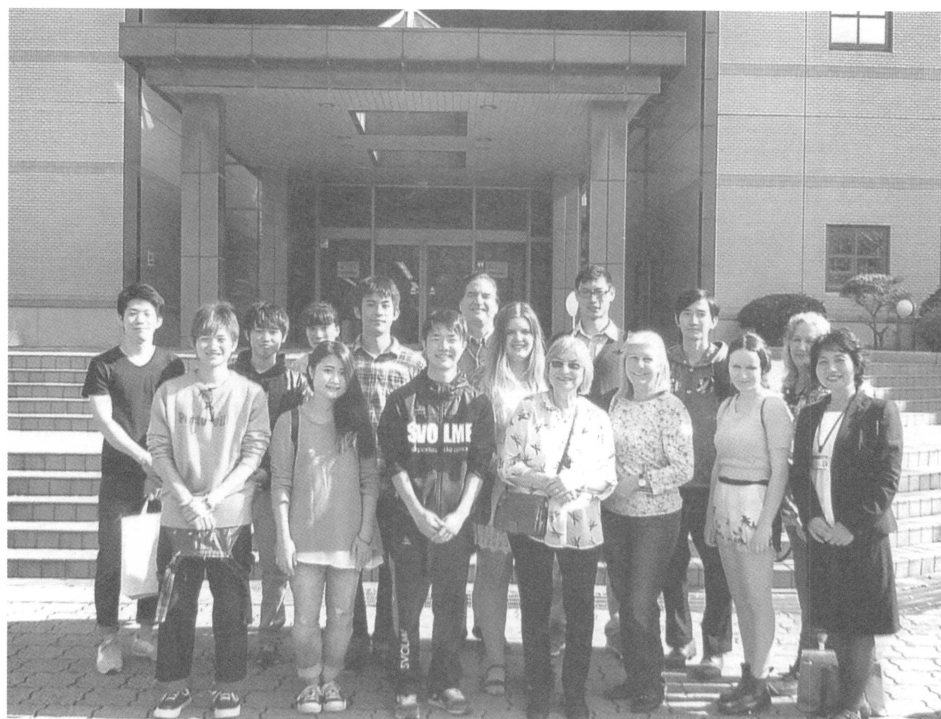


Figure 4. Australian haikuists visited International University of Kagoshima



Figure 5. *University students listen to Basho-inspired haiku*