

Renku, Haiku, and Buddhism

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Renku (1) has deep, historical roots in medieval courtly Japanese poetry. The very first recorded renku, a *tan renga* (“short renga”) appears in the *Man’yōshū*, Japan’s first poetry anthology compiled in the eighth century during the Nara Period. One of the contributors and compilers of the text, a statesman of the Yamato court named Ōtomo no Yakamochi, collaborated with an unnamed Buddhist nun to compose a five-phrase *waka* poem, renku-style. The nun supplied the 5-7-5 sound unit “upper verse” (*kami no ku*), to which Yakamochi responded, capping the poem with the 7-7 “lower verse” (*shimo no ku*). The following is Donald Keene’s translation.

The one who dammed up

The waters of Saho River

And planted the fields. —Anonymous Buddhist Nun

Should be the only one

To eat the harvested rice. —Ōtomo no Yakamochi (2)

This earliest surviving renku contains sexual innuendo. The harvesting of the rice can be read as Yakamochi taking possession of a woman, presumably the nun's daughter. So the first renku obliquely treats the topic of lovemaking—a required part of renku thereafter.

Over the next five hundred years renku continued to be written in the luxurious ambiance of the court in Kyoto, but members of other social classes also began to participate: samurai, merchants, commoners, and, most importantly for renku's development, Buddhist priests. By the thirteenth century, a system of elaborate rules called *fushimono* controlled the repetition of certain words and themes—the medieval origin of the rules embodied in the Category Frequency and Spacing Chart that today's renku poets follow (3). With these rules, renku began to evolve from an amusing literary game into a serious and capacious art form, requiring not only verses related to sexual love (*koi*) but expanding its scope to reflect, as contemporary renku master Shokan Tadashi Kondo calls it, the “Mandala of All Creation.” At the same time, renku poets adopted another Buddhist concept: an aversion to retrogression. Repeating or lingering on the same images or categories of existence came to be understood not only as an aesthetic violation but as a spiritual failing: the poetic equivalent of becoming trapped in vicious cycles of suffering (*rinne*). The names of the medieval shapers of renku up to the thirteenth century are unknown, but in their determination to resist cycles of repetition and in their adoption of the Mandala of All Creation as a template for composition, there can be no doubt that they were Buddhists who intended to create a distinctly Buddhist form of poetic art. In fact, as Gary Ebersole argues in an important essay (4), renku became a Buddhist ritual designed to lead its participants and readers to experience deeply the transience of the universe in order to make possible their enlightenment.

Renku were frequently presented to temples and shrines for safekeeping in their treasure rooms, and it was believed that the composition of linked verse could aid in the recovery from illness and could even assure victory in war. Though such grandiose claims were made by some, the poet-priests who developed renku understood its real, much deeper magic: that they were building into the very structure of their poetry a pattern for, and ritual of, enlightenment. Though it began as a form of frivolous poetic game for the elite of society, renku was radically and utterly transformed by the wandering monks (*tonsei-sha*) of medieval Japan to lead participants and readers toward spiritual insight (Ebersole 57).

The renku rulebook expanded over the centuries—becoming, for many, unbearably complicated—until 1372, when Nijō Yoshimoto simplified renku in his guide, *Ōan shinshiki* (“Northern Court Era New Form”). A court noble of the early Muromachi period (1336-1573), Yoshimoto advocated the inclusion of ordinary and even sometimes vulgar language rather than limiting renku to strictly formal poetic diction. He also managed to compress the important rules of the form onto a single page. His elegantly simple rulebook is still being followed today.

Though the rules can be represented by a single, one-page chart, deep thought and myriad spiritual concepts that could fill many volumes of commentary are embedded in them. To consider just one example, one might ask: Why are the spring and autumn seasons emphasized more than summer and winter? Renku rules allow for three to five back-to-back verses on spring or autumn, but only one to three consecutive verses about summer or winter. Spring and autumn outshine summer and winter in the Japanese imagination. The spring season for renku poets (and, later, for haiku poets) is epitomized by the blooming of cherry trees. “Blossoms” (*hana*) thus serve as a shorthand way of expressing the idea of spring in the Japanese imagination. When cherry blossoms appear in Japan, this is a traditional sign for farmers to begin their planting. This

means that the symbolism of cherry blossoms goes deeper than the fact that they teach, through their temporary, fragile beauty, a lesson in Buddhist transience (*mujō*). Cherry blossoms are also harbingers of planting time, indicating that the soil has warmed enough for seeds. Later in the year, the full moon near the autumn equinox (*meigetsu*) serves a similar symbolic function, indicating, in a sort of poetic shorthand, the entire season of harvest: that is, autumn. Thus, when Issa uses the phrase *tsuki hana* (“moon, blossoms”) to open one of his most famous haiku (5), he is evoking, in a single breath, the entire year from blossom-time to harvest-time, and, symbolically, an entire lifetime from cradle to grave. Because blossoms and the moon carry such immense symbolic weight, the rules of Yoshimoto require for every *renku* a specific number of blossom and moon verses. For example, in a *kasen* of 36 verses, two blossom verses and three moon verses are required. In the twenty-stanza *nijūin*, a shorter form that has become quite popular in Japanese *renku* circles in recent years, two verses are devoted to the moon, only one to blossoms. And in the hundred-stanza *hyakuin* that was all the rage in Sōgi’s time, poets included seven moon verses and four blossom verses.

The privileging of spring and autumn, including the requirement for blossom and moon verses, is deeply grounded in the agricultural year as it was understood and celebrated in medieval Japan. Nevertheless, one might ask: Are these rules still pertinent for twenty-first century poets, many of whom dwell in cities and are out of touch with the natural cycles that produce their food? Why bother to have special rules that favor an emphasis on spring and autumn verses over those about summer and winter? These are good, legitimate questions that must be answered by the contemporary and future *renku* communities. I would argue that a poetry that brings human beings closer to a feeling of attunement to nature and its cycles is a good thing, and so the traditional *renku* rules concerning the seasons not only continue to have

great value today, they might even be more valuable now than ever. In many cities, community gardens and the “locavore” movement for eating locally grown food manifest a growing desire (or might it be a growing *need*?) to reconnect with the earth and its cycles. Perhaps renku can help people to reestablish a sense of belonging to, and participating in, the phases of our spinning, tilting planet. In any case, the renku rules regarding spring and autumn, blossom and moon, are *not* arbitrary.

Many readers familiar with Japanese literature may be surprised to learn that the early great masters of “haiku”—Bashō, Buson, and Issa—never wrote haiku. The first verse or *hokku* of renku, after its several centuries of Buddhist definition, evolved to become what Shiki in the early twentieth century renamed “haiku.” Influenced by Western secularism and Western poetic ideas that were flooding into Japan during the Meiji Period, Shiki decided to make the *hokku* an independent poetic form, replacing the communal and Buddhist spirit of renku with non-religious, Western-styled individualism. Shiki, eager to embrace Western aesthetic notions, particularly German notions of romantic subjectivity, proclaimed the death of renku and birth of haiku. He wanted what was formerly the starting verse of linked poetry to start . . . nothing. To use a sports metaphor, if one can imagine discarding all the exciting action of a tennis match—the volleys, the games, the tiebreaks, the sets—and keep only its single, powerful, opening serve, this would be similar to what Shiki did when he removed *hokku* as a starter for renku’s chain. Poets who followed his lead would now focus completely on creating stand-alone verses rather than devising the opening move of a richly complex, collaborative, and universe-exploring game.

Shiki removed the *hokku* from renku, but he couldn’t remove renku from the *hokku*. Though he renamed it “haiku” to signify a fresh new beginning, the verse form retains an intrinsic, structural, renku-specific quality. Every haiku/*hokku* is, by original design, a

microcosm of renku; it consists of two poetic phrases separated by a hard grammatical break. For example, Bashō's *furuike ya* ("old pond") can be thought of as the opening verse of a miniature renku. After the grammatical break signaled by the cutting particle *ya*, a second "verse" follows: *kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto* ("a frog jumping-into-water sound"). The reader is invited to contemplate and imagine how these two tiny verses of the micro-renku connect: an old pond and a plopping-into-water frog. Whether Shiki realized this or not, much of the power of haiku derives from the fact that it functions as a two-image renku. Shiki wanted to wash away the Buddhism inherent in renku, but as a mini-renku itself, the *hokku* or haiku or whatever one wants to call it is still, potentially, a ritual for exploring an ever-shifting, transient universe. And it still, potentially, can inspire contemplation and spiritual insight.

Shiki's concept of haiku philosophically belongs more to the Western world of Descartes and Kant than its predecessor, the *hokku*, which pertains to an older, Buddhist vision of the universe in which ego is the central impediment to one's spiritual progress and enlightenment. Whereas haiku as Shiki sought to shape it is the independent creation (and potentially ego-stroking construct) of a single poet, renku is an interactive mode of writing in which two or more poets explore the linguistic expression of reality with creative insight while *suppressing* their egos. This collaborative approach increases the objective quality of renku, enabling surprising discoveries that any single poet could not make on his or her own.

Many twentieth- and twenty-first century haiku poets around the world have drawn inspiration from Bashō, Buson, and Issa—Buddhist artists who understood that personal experience has universal meaning in terms of the great cycle of seasons. As a result, much of the Buddhist flavor of renku can still be perceived in contemporary haiku. However, there are also plenty of poets in Japan and the West who scoff at the Buddhism that historically informed

renku, hence haiku, and who passionately criticize the emphasis on Zen by some English translators of haiku, such as R. H. Blyth. These poets embrace Shiki's modern, secular, and individualistic concept of haiku as a literary genre: a sort of one-breath sonnet. Such so-called avant-garde haiku poets in Japan and around the world have made haiku the vehicle for showing off their cleverness through abstract language games inspired more by French symbolism than by Buddhist sutras (6). For these poets, a return to renku with its culture of sharing and ego-suppression would perhaps be spiritually healthy.

Haiku poets in the twenty-first century stand at a crossroads. We can either continue Shiki's trajectory of de-spiritualizing haiku, or we can cultivate a more traditional understanding of haiku as an invitation to contemplate, with fellow travelers, the Mandala of All Creation on a journey, all of us together, to enlightenment.

NOTES

1. Originally called *renga* and later referred to as *haikai no renga*, the most common term today for Japanese linked verse is *renku*.

2. Poem 1635 of the *Man'yōshū*. Donald Keene, "The Comic Tradition in Renga," John W. Hall & Toyoda Takeshi, Eds., *Japan in the Muromachi Age* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977) 241-77; qtd. on p. 244. Keene favors this as the first renga because the two contributions make a single poem (243-44); some Japanese poets trace the origins of linked verse to the *Kojiki* (early eighth century), in which an old man answers a verse by Yamato-Takeru-no-Mikoto with a verse of his own; the two verses together, however, do not read like a single poem.

3. See, for example, Higashi Meiga, Tange Hiroyuki, and Hotokebuchi Kengo, *Jūshichi ki* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 2007) 557.

4. Gary L. Ebersole, “The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan.” *The Eastern Buddhist* 16.2 (Autumn 1983): 50-71.

5. 月花や四十九年のむだ歩き

tsuki hana ya shi jūku nen no muda aruki

moon! blossoms!

forty-nine years walking around

a waste

6. See Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, *Haiku 21: An Anthology of Contemporary English-Language Haiku* (Modern Haiku Press, 2011); and Ban'ya Natsuishi, *Flying Pope* (Cyberwit.net, 2008).