

Initial translations of and notes on Ryokan's New Year and spring haiku

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Abstract

This paper presents some initial ventures into translating the haiku of Ryokan, a noted Zen poet who spent most of his life as a hermit in central Niigata. Although Ryokan's tanka and Chinese verses are often translated into English and feature in a number of collections, his haiku have been largely overlooked. This paper examines the historical and cultural context of Ryokan's haiku before exploring some possible English translations of his New Year and spring haiku. The translations start from the seasonal word (called *kigo* in Japanese) and attempt to convey the unique features of haiku in English. Future research will delve into Ryokan's summer and autumn haiku.

Key words: literary translation, haiku, Japanese poetry in English, Ryokan

Haiku is the shortest form of Japanese poetry, and perhaps the most well-known and deeply established of all non-English poetic forms in English (Addiss, 2012). It was developed mainly by Basho, who lived 100 years before Ryokan. Haiku consists of 17 syllables arranged into three phrases, five, seven, and five. Although often written in 3 lines in English, Japanese haiku are typically written in a single line, with the phrases differentiated not by line breaks but by syntactic devices and special

vocabulary such as “cutting words” and “seasonal words” (Higginson & Harter, 1985).

Traditional Japanese poetry, including haiku, has three levels of expression: the text itself, the choice of script for the syllables, and the aesthetics of the calligraphy, including column breaks. In contrast, apart from some outlier forms such as concrete poetry, the meaning of English poetry almost entirely conveyed in the words themselves (Hasegawa, 2012). Moreover, most Japanese poetry is written vertically, particularly poetry composed with the *fude* brush. Thus, “column” is used rather than “line.” Because phrase breaks are understood textually rather than visually, Japanese writers are free to break columns at different places than phrase breaks. This can create a tension that haiku masters exploit to give their works layered meanings (Sato-Rossberg & Wakabayashi, 2012). When translated into English, this is nearly impossible to convey, as English lacks a standardized poetic vocabulary in the same way Japanese does.

In Japanese poetry, each word or syllable can be written in a standard script of hiragana or an ideographic phonetic system called *man'yo gana*. Hiragana uses one letter for one syllable, while *man'yo gana* uses ideographs to represent sounds, without regard to the original meaning of the ideograph. While hiragana assigns each character to a single sound, different *man'yo gana* ideographs may share the same pronunciation (Keene, 1955). Haiku poets such as Basho, Buson, and Issa used a mix of Chinese ideographs (carrying meaning) and purely phonetic hiragana and *man'yo gana*. Ryokan typically uses *man'yo gana* exclusively for his waka and haiku poems. *Man'yo* characters often have more strokes than standard phonetic characters and is a complicated, ornate script.

This, combined with Ryokan's flowing, extreme cursive style of penmanship, can make his written works difficult to decipher upon initial exposure. In Japanese poetry, the choice of script gives another layer of meaning to the poem, and Japanese writers have multiple choices for combinations of symbols to convey the same sound and meaning (Keene, 1988). Tanahashi (2012) points out that Japanese may be the only language that offers this choice, and one challenge of the translator is dealing with these variations in script. In translation, this characteristic is nearly impossible to render in a different language (Donovon, 2019).

Visually, the standard phonics of hiragana are said to be plain, soft, and fluid, while ideographs are intricate, rich and dense with connotations. As *man'yo gana* have features of both, it embodies both sets of characteristics.

Tanahashi (2012) points out the steps to making Ryokan's handwritten poetry readable for modern Japanese:

- (1) identifying each ideograph or phonetic ideograph (*man'yo gana*)
- (2) converting the semicursive and cursive writings to formal script and types
- (3) pronouncing each sentence as it is written
- (4) dividing words and identifying inflected forms
- (5) understanding the semantics
- (6) pronouncing each sentence in a way that is commonly understandable to the

Japanese audience

Additional steps include identifying historical references, interpreting the lines in the context of Ryokan's lived experience, analyzing the texture of the poem (taking into account puns, allusions, and wordplay) and finally translating it into the target language (Sato-Rossberg and Wakabayashi, 2012).

The theme of Ryokan's poetry is his hermetic life and the practice of *takuhatsu* (the religious practice of begging for food), and he expressed these simple things both directly and deeply in a way that no other known poet of the era could (Kodama and Yanagishima, 1999). Another common theme is loneliness. He lived most of his life either as a hermit or a pilgrim, almost always alone. He writes honestly and directly about loneliness and his hermitic life, down to the fleas which interrupt his sleep.

One of the greatest haiku poets was Basho (1644-1694), who was also largely responsible for introducing the haiku form and deciding its shape, content, and philosophy. Basho maintained that poetry, particularly haiku, should be simultaneously stress change and permanence. This is exemplified by one of his most well-known poems,

The ancient pond

A frog leaps in

The sound of the water (Translation: Keene (1955))

In this haiku, the ancient pond illustrates permanence, both as a physical manifestation and as a poetic image. The frog, specifically the frog's splash into the pond shows sudden change in the context of the pond's placidity and illusion of stability.

Haiku is closely linked with Zen Buddhism, where *satori* (enlightenment) comes suddenly and unexpectedly; a flash of change in an otherwise plain life. This concept is exactly what Basho strives for as "change" in his haiku. Haiku as Basho practiced it relies on physical sensations and manifestations. There is little of the abstract or allusional in the best haiku; they rely on the sudden snap of *satori*, a flash across one or more of the senses, and then a fading away (Higginson and Harter, 1985).

Ryokan (1758-1831) was a contemporary of haiku poet Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) and lived in the Echigo region (Niigata) near the Sea of Japan coastline. His father was village leader, and Ryokan received education in Chinese and Japanese classics. After a spiritual crisis at the age of 20, he entered a Zen monastery and in 1780 became disciple of Kokusen, the top Soto Zen *roshi* (spiritual teacher) of the period. He traveled with Kokusen to Entsu-ji in Tamashima and lived there until Kokusen died in 1791.

Although he has been chosen as Kokusen's dharma heir, he rejected this path, which would have included running his own temple, and spent the next 10 years on a pilgrimage which took him all over Japan (Stevens, 2004). By the time he was in his early 40s, he returned to the area where he was born in Niigata and lived out the rest of his days there

In Echigo, Ryokan spent most of his time in mountain hermitages near Mt. Yahiko and Mt. Kakuda, near the Sea of Japan. He supported himself by begging and became well-known in the area for his kindness and generosity. Stories have been passed down of his playing with children in local villages and drinking Japanese sake with farmers and friends (Yuasa, 1981).

Before his death and in ill health, he was forced to leave the mountains and stay at the home of a friend. At this time, he fell in love with a young nun named Teishin and they began long correspondence in verse. She was with him when he died at the age of 73, on January 6, 1831 (Stevens, 1997).

Although Ryokan wrote thousands of poems and poem-letters, both in Japanese and in Chinese (including 1400 waka, 400 Chinese poems, and over 100 haiku), he made no attempt to collect or preserve his work, preferring to leave it scattered around or given as gifts. Teishin collected some of Ryokan's work and published the

first volume of his verse, called “*Hachisu no Tsuyu*” (Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf), posthumously in 1835.

Since then, many collections of his works have appeared, making him one of the most popular Zen poets in Japan. Besides his poetry, Ryokan is also admired for his calligraphy. His brushwork is considered to be natural, unaffected, wild but accurate, free but disciplined (Tanahashi, 2012). The first English volume of Ryokan translations appeared in 1981 (*The Zen Poems of Ryokan*, by Nobuyuki Yuasa).

Although the bulk of Ryokan's translated verse consists of tanka and Chinese poetry, his haiku have not yet received so much attention. In the remainder of this paper, some of Ryokan's haiku from New Years into Spring will be examined and translated.

Translations and notes

New Year Haiku

1

のっぺりと師走も知らず今朝の春

nopperi to shiwasu mo shirazu kesa no haru

Quietly setting
December aside on this
New Year's morning

In this poem, the season of getting ready for New Year's celebrations is one of the busiest in the year, but when the first morning of the new year calls, there is a feeling of peaceful joy.

Seasonal word: 今朝の春, a phrase which refers to New Year's Morning. Although the kanji for spring is used, New Year's day in the old calendar often fell on or near the first day of spring also by the old calendar.

Note on *nopperi*: basically means “featureless,” in this case the nuance is of quiet and not sudden change

Ryokan's poems are set in Niigata, called Snow Country (*yukiguni*), and the difficulties of winter in the deep Echigo snow are common in Ryokan's poems. Here,

this is a rare and sudden sense of calm on this year's new year's day. The old calendar places New Year's Day in February, which is traditionally the time of constant and deepest snow accumulations in Niigata.

2

よそはでも顔は白いぞ嫁が君

yosohademo kao ha shiroizo yome ga kimi

Face as white
As if fully made-up
Mouse on New Year's Day

Kigo: 嫁が君 *yomegakimi*, a phrase used in place of "mouse" after the New Year

(A white mouse seen at New Year's was believed to be a manifestation of the god of fortune.)

3

春雨や門松のゆゆるみけり

harusame ya kadomatsu no shime yurumi keru

A spring rain loosens
The tightly bound
New Year's decorations

Seasonal expression: 門松 (kadomatsu),
ゆゆる shime

春雨 harusame, spring rain, which technically is a seasonal word from spring.

The question of whether to translate it as a transliteration, or to translate it with explanation, or with a footnote. A transliteration will rob the verse of its succinct power, and haiku is a delicate form, with only 17 syllables to leave an impression. Giving a few of these syllables over to a Japanese term that most English readers will not know is risky and aesthetically abrupt. On the other hand, using a phrase like new year's decorations will not call to mind the traditional kadomatsu for most non-Japanese readers.

Spring haiku

4

春雨や静になづる破れふくべ

harusame ya shizuka ni nadzuru yarefukube

Spring rain
Stroking softly
This broken gourd

Seasonal expression: 春雨 (spring rain)
ふくべ (gourd) is also a seasonal word, but is more commonly associated with autumn

5

春雨や友を訪ぬる想ひあり

haruame ya tomo o tazuneru omohi ari

Overjoyed
I travel through the spring rain
To visit a friend

Seasonal expression: 春雨 (spring rain)

6

水の面にあや織りみだる春の雨

mizu no mo ni ayaori midaru haru no ame

Various patterns appear
And disappear on the water
The spring rain

Seasonal expression: 春の雨 (spring rain)

7

いでわれも今日はまぢらむ春の山

ideware mo kyou ha majiramu haru no yama

Today I too
Will become one with
The spring mountain

Seasonal expression: 春の山 (spring mountain)

8

新池や蛙とびこむ音もなし

araike ya kawazu tobikomou oto mo nashi

In the new pond
Not even the sound of
Jumping frogs

Seasonal expression: 蛙 (frog)

Interpretation: based on Basho, as in the new pond there are no frogs, there are no poets in this age to carry on the haiku tradition of Basho (Tanigawa, 2014).

9

夢覚て聞ば蛙の遠音哉

yume sameite kikeba kawazu no toone kana

Awaking from a dream
With only the sound of frogs
In the distance

Seasonal expression: 蛙 (frog)

The chorus of frogs that accompany the ponds and newly flooded rice paddies in early spring is a dynamic performance, reaching a crescendo in the first hours after dark, before gently fading out just before daybreak. That the singing of the frogs has grown distant is perhaps a sign that dawn is near. (Tanigawa, 30)

Not just a sign of the season, but a marker of time throughout the shortening spring nights.

10

山里は蛙の声となりけり

yamazato ha kawazu no koe to nari ni keru

In my mountain village
The chattering of frogs
Grows stronger

Seasonal expression: 蛙 (frog)

Water is in the paddies, and the water has warmed enough even in the mountains for frogs to hatch and start singing.

11

今日来ずば明日は散りなむ梅の花

kyou kozuba asu ha chirinamu ume no hana

If you don't come today
Tomorrow the plum blossoms
Will have fallen

Seasonal expression: 梅の花 (plum blossom)

12

青みたるなかに辛夷の花ざかり

aomitaru naka ni kobushi no hana zakari

Nestled in green
The magnolia
Is blooming

Seasonal expression: 辛夷 (kobus magnolia)

The kobus magnolia blossoms in white in contrast to the deepening spring green around it, another sign the spring is taking root.

13

雪しろのかかる芝生のつくづくし

yuki shiro no kakaru shibafu no tsukuzukushi

Melted snow waters
The horsetail sprouting
In the garden

Seasonal expression: 雪しろ (melted snow water); つくづくし (horsetail)

14

雪しろの寄する古野のつくづくし

yuki shiro no yo suru furuno no tsukuzukushi

Snow water
Rushing over the horsetail
In last year's garden

Seasonal expression: 雪しろ (melted snow water), 古野 (old garden), つくづくし (horsetail)

15

雪汁や古野にかかるつくづくし

yukishiru ya furuno ni kakaru tsuku dzukushi

Melted snow water
Covers the field where
The new horsetail appears

Seasonal expression: 雪しろ (melted snow water), 古野 (old garden), つくづくし (horsetail)

16

鶯に夢さまされし朝げかな

en ni yume samasareshi asage kana

Early spring dawn

Awakened from my dream
By a mandarin duck

Seasonal expression: 鴛 (mandarin duck)

Short night, pleasant dream, even better than dream; ducks call

17

鴛や百人ながら気がつかず

enou ya hyakunin nagara ki ga tsukazu

Poor duck
Not one of the hundred poets
Noticed you

Seasonal expression: 鴛 (duck)

18

梅が香の朝日に匂へ夕桜

ume ga ka no asahi ni nioe yuuzakura

In the morning
Fragrant plum blossoms can rival
The evening cherry

Seasonal expression: 梅が香 (plum fragrance), 桜 (cherry tree/blossom)

19

世の中は桜の花になりけり

yo no naka ha sakura no hana ni narinikeri

Cherry blossoms
Completely cover the
World of people

Seasonal expression: 桜の花 (cherry blossom/flower)

20

山は花酒屋酒屋の杉ばやし

yama ha hana sakaya sakaya no sugibayashi

Seeking cherry blossoms
I go around drinking places
In the cedar forest

Seasonal expression: 花 (flower)

A play on cedar (すぎ) and alcohol (さけ)

21

同じくば花の下にて一とよ寝む

onajikuba hana no shita nite hitoyo nemu

If it's just the same
I prefer to sleep under
A blooming cherry tree tonight

Seasonal expression: 花の下 (under the (cherry) flower(s))

22

須磨寺の昔を問へば山桜

sumadera no mukashi wo toheba yamazakura

Asking about the past
At Sumadera, the answer is
Mountain cherry blossoms

Seasonal expression: 山桜 (mountain cherry)

23

この宮や辛夷の花に散る桜

kono kyuu ya kobushi no hana ni chiru sakura

At this shrine
Cherry blossoms fall
On magnolia flowers

Seasonal expression: 辛夷 (magnolia), 桜 (cherry (blossom))

24

散る桜残る桜も散る桜

chirusakura nokoru sakura mo chirusakura

Fallen cherry blossoms,
The remaining petals too
Will soon fall.

Seasonal expression: 散桜 (fallen cherry blossoms)

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