



Research Article

POETICS OF JAPANESE CLASSICAL HAIKU

Nguyen Thi Mai Lien

Ha Noi University of Education

Corresponding author: Nguyen Thi Mai Lien – Email: mailien.edu@gmail.com

Received: Aril 03, 2019; Revised: May 05, 2019; Accepted: June 10, 2019

ABSTRACT

Haiku (俳句) is considered as a kind of beautiful and special flower in the garden of human poetry. From a poetic perspective, haiku has many unique characteristics of structure, poetry rules, the artistic space - time and other artistic tactics. Haiku expresses a spirit that Japanese people adore that is wabi - simplicity and frugality. The haiku's form is not gaudy and not elaborate, but haiku contains profound content, profound Zen principles that are very practical and close to the current life.

Keywords: Japanese literature, haiku, poetics, Zen principles.

Preamble

Haiku (俳句) is considered as a kind of beautiful and special flower in the garden of human poetry. Haiku is a name that is made up of two words of *haikai* (humour) and *hokku* (plays a sentence - a sentence that starts a renga poem). Haiku was elevated to the illustrious position on the tribune of the world poetry in the seventeenth century by Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). R. H. Blyth, in *Japanese Life and Character in Senryu*, highly praised haiku poetry that was Japanese soul, and Basho, who had the merit of bringing haiku to the top of glory, was the creator of Japanese souls. He wrote: "Japan was born with Basho in 1644. M. Basho was a creator of Japanese soul" (R. H. Blyth, 1960, p.6). Regarding poetics, haiku has many unique characteristics. I only limited the study of haiku poetry at the classical haiku because from the Meiji era, after the innovations of the poet Shiki, haiku had dramatic changes in content and poetics.

1. Nothingness structure

Nothingness structure is an artistic characteristic of haiku. In this article, I use *nothingness* instead of *vacuum* that is still used in many documents because *vacuum* is a physics term referring to the absolute empty space such as vacuum in the incandescent bulbs, and *nothingness* (虚空) is the term of Zen Buddhism that means the state of tranquility in the mind of the monks at the time of ecstasy, a clear mind, without

Cite this article as: Nguyen Thi Mai Lien (2019). Poetics of Japanese Classical Haiku. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science*, 16(7), 105-113.

contemplation, thus being able to think clearly. In Zen philosophy, “no” (空) and “nothing” (無) are concepts that are very close to each other. Both of these categories are directed to the state of open mind, “unintentionally”, to overcome all obstacles to achieve freedom; the state in which humans can interact with all things and phenomena in the original nature. These concepts are used by famous Zen masters in Japanese philosophy history in their compositions, such as Zen master Dogen (道元), Saigyō (西行) and Myōe (明恵). Later, the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata, who firstly received the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature, also expressed very successfully in his writings. These concepts, as Kawabata said that they are not same as the “nihilism” of The West. It is the “magic nothingness”, “no” but contains the miracle universe, embracing things that the naked eye cannot see. According to Zen master D.T. Suzuki: “In the final sense, the philosophy of Zen masters is to achieve “no” (空) or “nirvana” (涅槃) in Dharma” (D.T. Suzuki, 2019, p.177). Since then, the concept of nothingness has penetrated many types of Japanese art such as kado, karesansui (Zen gardens), sumie paintings, chado, and haiku. The gaps in the poems have created a special structure that makes sense, and the beauty of haiku becomes hidden. The nothingness spaces are not absolutely empty but there are many potential meanings that readers, with different experiences, fantasies, and knowledge will have different awareness.

Nothingness structure is present at both outside, inside and in the main image of the poem:

(1) Each haiku has only 17 syllables that are distributed into three lines 5-7-5. The minimum number of words has created the maximum space outside of the poem:

一家に遊女もねたり萩と月 (Basho, 1689)

Under one roof / A harlot, also, slept / Bush clover and the moon.

The poem about a harlot only has 17 syllables equivalent to about 10 words, so the poet can only sketch or name objectively one or a few images or sounds (inn 家 - ie, a harlot 遊女 - yuujo, moon 月 - tsuki, clover 萩) that cannot interpret meanings or express emotion.

(2) The poet composes haiku as if releasing images and the sounds into transparent nothingness and let them float. This makes the gaps between the images and the words. Readers must use their experience, knowledge, and imagination to connect them. In the above poem, by experience, we know that the harlots are considered to be “deep in the depths of life”, the moon and clover flowers symbolize elegance and nobility. Yet they were placed side by side, being equal with each other. By way of enumeration, Basho treasured to lift a harlot who was despised by the world to noble status to the moon, the stars, the flowers, and grass. When they slept, they returned to the peaceful Buddha, becoming one with the stars, the moon, and the delicate flowers. Everything plays an

important role in the universe. All distinctions of the nobility or the lowliness, the goodness or the evil, the reason or the wrong exist only in our thinking.

(3) Basho's harlot poem has a large number of nouns. The number of adverbs, verbs, and adjectives are minimized. The poem expresses the concept that it is necessary to use less the adverbs and the verbs (M. Shiki 1867-1902). This makes the images and sounds become more generalized, meaningful, and symbolic. The spaces are reserved for imagination and co-creation of readers.

The *four sentences and five syllables poetry* of Chinese, ghazal poetry (double poetry) of Persia and India also have a small number of syllables. However, the images of people and things in these kinds of poetry are described in detail with their actions, states, and characteristics. This is different from the characteristics of the haiku poetry as described above.

Commenting on the brief feature of haiku, French critic R. Barthes reckoned that the briefness of haiku is not a matter of formality. Haiku is not a rich thought drawn into a short form but a brief fact that has found its fitting form (Nhat Chieu, 1994, p. 54). R. Barthes is right in the haiku, a "brief affair" actually found its fit. However, it is necessary to see that the "brief affair" implicitly conceals a "rich thought", a profoundly and open idea, not limited to that situation, so the haiku is "a rich thought gathers up a short form".

2. The rules of poetry

The rules of *the four sentences-five syllables poetry* and *the six syllables line-eight syllables line poetry* are stricter than haiku. Although one *the six syllables line-eight syllables line* poem accepts the variation, basically the double sentence of *the six syllables line-eight syllables line* poem always requires the rhymes. It must be both the back rhyme and the leg rhyme. This makes it impossible to penetrate the poetry of polyphonic or sticky language and without tone. The *four sentences-five syllables poetry* has many forms (10 forms), but even though it must be rhymed. In addition, these genres of poetry are even required a parallel structure that a specific expression is dual. In *the four sentences-five syllables* poetry, duality requires the number of words in each sentence to be equal, but in Chinese, each word is a syllable so the number of syllables of each line of poetry is equal. Next, these poems must have the pairs of corresponding sentences on bars and means, which may be contradictory. *The six syllables line-eight syllables line* poetry has a minor duality. Six syllables line is divided into two sides. Each side has 3 syllables corresponding to each other. Eight syllables line is divided into two sides. Each side has the four syllables corresponding to each other.

Haiku is a poem of inter-language, "an agglutinative language" (Mitsuyoshi Numano 2009), without tone, and most importantly, rhyming, perhaps not. Moreover, haiku has not duality. The feature that seems to be "easy" makes haiku easier to "enter" into countries

that use Indo-European languages than *the four sentences-five syllables poetry* and *the six syllables line-eight syllables line poetry*, those can be more stringent.

The following poem has no rhyme:

青柳の泥にしだるる塩干かな (1694)

Green willows / Drooping in the mud / Ebb tide.

This is the fundamental cause of the spread of haiku in poetry throughout the world while “*the four sentences-five syllables poetry* only spreads to the countries “co-culture” that are the countries that once used Chinese characters and mono-lingual languages, and *the six syllables line-eight syllables line poetry* has not exceeded the Vietnamese green bamboo groves” (Nguyen Thi Bich Hai, 2009).

3. Artistic space - time in haiku

The Japanese are very sensitive to nature and the impermanent fragility of beauty. Therefore, artistic time which is reflected in haiku poetry often expresses the season rhythm of nature. This characteristic is expressed in the haiku in a way that a haiku has always the words expressing seasons (語 kigo). There are words that are the names of the seasons such as spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There are many words that express the typical images for the season such as cherry, apricot blossom, plum blossom, convoluted flower, green willow, and oar, oats, wrenches, frogs, mud marks, and butterflies (spring); iris, azaleas, cicadas, and sun (summer); the moon, clover, chrysanthemum, maple leaf, crickets, autumn wind, dew, crow, and wild geese (autumn); and snow, wild fields, and pine (winter).

Moreover, the images called in the poem belong to the reality moment when suddenly appears before the poet's eyes, not the images of the past in the memory or future images in the dream. The poet does not express his emotions but merely records the moment of being “here, right now” of life. Poem: “I'm sad / when I see / the cat dies” is not haiku. The poem: “The cat died/ The mouth opened / In the pouring rain” (M. McClintock) is haiku. In other words, the work of a haikin is like the work of a photographer, holding a lens to record the images of the moment that is imminent. This characteristic of haiku expresses the influence of Zen. Zen considers the actual moment to be the most valuable asset of every human being. Because we cannot relive even a minute of the past, we donnot live even a minute of the future. But we often remember the past or dream about things that have not happened and lose the energy and wisdom that we have in the reality moment that we really live. The world changed in the blink of an eye. So, if we neglect the moment of reality, we may miss many things. Only after sneezing, the world has changed:

I sneeze and lose the shadow / The lizard bird (Yayu)

There is not the direct revealed the emotion of the lyrical subject in haiku. R. Tagore remarked subtly about this characteristic of haiku. The poet only introduced the topic and stepped away to the side. The poet retreated so quickly because Japanese readers have

great spiritual powers of imagination (Nhat Chieu, 2012). Other researchers agree that haiku “is deep lyrical, minimalistic, light-hearted on the principle of evocation, penmanship of symbolism, surrealism (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Xuan, 2011). Each haiku is a quick note in a few moments of enlightenment (satori), the moments of the Wisdom gives us a profound insight into everything (Harold Stewart, 1973, p.122). Clearly, haiku poets have streamlined the emotion that Tagore called “the streamlining of the soul.” This simplification gives the haiku a strange simplicity so much so that many people think that haiku is not poetry.

In the article, *Time and Space in Tang's poetry*, Tran Dinh Su showed five categories of time as *individual life time*, *universal - natural time*, *historical time*, *time of living and supernatural time* in Tang's poetry. “Although mentioning many forms of time, the overwhelming sense of Tang poetry is the cult of the greatness of endless time which has transformed into immutable space” (Nguyễn Khắc Phi and Tran Dinh Su, 1997, p.16). This inspiration is completely different from the excitement of the haiku poet, who is fully present for the moment of real life.

In Tang's poetry, basically, “the space of the universe encompasses and dominates the space of families, houses, hometowns and bodies, becoming the most unique and final scope for people to perceive human life”, the cosmic space “represents the human soul”; “the space of Tang poetry is an aura but also a melancholy of Tang's poetry” (Nguyễn Khắc Phi, Tran Dinh Su, 1997, p 22, 24).

Artistic space in haiku poetry is very rich and diverse, expressing the beauty of the land of Japan, creating an artistic characteristic of the classical haiku that always has season theme (季題 kidai - a natural theme of four seasons. However, the classic haiku did not describe the magnificent images of the universe but focused on simple scenes, small animals, such as shells, snail shells... on the sea beaches; choi choi birds, sparrows, chirping birds, wrenches, butterflies, crickets and fireflies... on the fields, mountains with apricot flowers, plums, cherries, iris, bamboo trees...); rivers and lakes with mud, willow, boat... Places in haiku are also Japanese landmarks such as Mount Haguro, Arashi, Sumida River, Lake Nio...

4. Artistic modalities

Haiku is like a simple girl, wearing jewelry very few, very few make-up. So many people think that it is not beautiful. However, on a moderate level, haiku also uses a number of creative artistic modalities appropriate to the content.

4.1. The listed as a modality appears relatively much in haiku. We do not have conditions to survey and statistics, but we can see many haiku poems using this method. Partly because it meets the requirements of naming things, images, and sounds to create spaces and the generalization.

枯れ枝に鳥のとまりけり秋の暮 (Basho, 1680)

On a leafless branch / A crow / autumn dusk

In the above poem, Basho simply lists three things that represent three aspects of clarification in a haiku: the place (dry branch 枯れ枝 - kareeda) - time (autumn 秋の暮 - akino kure) - the incident (a crow 烏のとまり - karasuno tomari) to answer three questions: Where? When? Things? Listing and putting three things together create a static picture but having a haunting effect. The gray fog covered the autumn afternoon; a crow on a dry branch. The remarkable point of haiku is at the stop (*tomaru* verb) of the crow's wings on the branch, of the time (autumn afternoon) and also of that space (dry branch). The “big” and “overwhelming” stop has gently awakened the moving mind of the inner flow of humans, causing the poet (and the readers) to “stop”, to escape the constant desires that are caused by the outside life. Experiencing the moment of awakening inside oneself is created by the effect of the images in the poem. The calm, tranquility, and transcendence world are over all things in this haiku that is different from the sadness of a lonely old age in the two sentences of *The Inspiration* poem - Nguyen Khuyen).

4.2. Metaphor is a method of underground comparing that means comparing A to B based on some similarities, but A is hidden, and only B appears on the text. The expression of metaphor is to use the word B to refer to A. In haiku, metaphors are used with high frequency, perhaps because metaphor will give new meanings for images. In haiku, all three metaphors are used. Metaphysical metaphor is a method of using words that refer to things to indicate people. The following poem of Basho is a motherly cry *banka*:

に取らば消えん涙ぞ熱き秋の霜 (Basho, 1684)

When held in hand / Melt away it will, this autumn frost / My tears so hot.

Basho who used to go on pilgrimage here and there all over Japan, lived like a floating cloud. When he heard his mother's death, he came back home to mourn. But when he arrived at the house, his mother was buried. His older brother gave him the relic which was a handful of hair with white threads. In the poem, the autumn fog image (秋の霜 - akino shimo) is floated at the end line. How does it relate to other images? First of all, it is a comparison image of his mother's hair with white strands:

Old mother with misty hair (Doan Thi Diem - *Chinh phu ngam*)

The dewdrop is also a tear (なみだ *namida*), weeping for the mother of the son who was his fifties, tears into his eyes. However, the fall dews also metaphor for short human life:

Life is just the morning dews on the lotus leaf (R. Tagore - No 27, *The Gardener*)

Metaphor has made the poem become sparkling and multifaceted. It is not only the song of crying his mum, but also the sad song of the human condition.

Because haiku promotes the interrelationship, harmony, and mutual transformation relationship of all things in the universe, poets also use the metaphor of sensation shift. This method allows expressing the wonderful movements and interactions of the universe:

閑さや岩にしみ入る蟬の声 (Basho, 1689)

Stillness / Into the rocks / Sinks the voice of cicadas.

The poem was composed when Basho visited Riusakuji Temple. The scenery is absolutely quiet. Is this the silence of the temple space or of the inner space of the author - an inner mind that all the chaos of desire has turned off, becomes clear as a mirror? With that “mindless mindfulness”, the poet has wisely heard the mysterious relationship of all things in the universe. In silence, the sound of the cicadas sounded as if it was tearing up the silence. The Japanese idiom *semishigure* compares the voices of cicadas (の 声 *seminokoe*) with the sound of a shower (雨 *shigure*) made the poet realize the correlation between the sound of the summer chorus and the sound of a shower. The voices of cicadas that like the sound of rain pouring cold water permeate every stone. Between two things that seem to be unrelated: stone (岩 - *iwa*) - tangible, hard, solid, rough and the voices of cicadas (蟬 の 声 - *seminokoe*), invisible sound in Basho's hearing there is a wonderful interaction. It is also the characteristic of all things in the universe. They exist in an intimate relationship but that is so mysterious and mysterious.

Humanized metaphor is a method of rhetorical use words that express people to refer things, making lively things. Haiku often uses this kind of metaphor to highlight the equal relationship of all things...

行春や鳥なき魚の目は泪 (Basho, 1689)

Spring passes - / Birds sing / Tears in fish's eyes.

When the poet separated with his friends in the spring, he felt that everything was sad. The fish (魚 - *uo*) cried; the fish's eyes (目 - *me*) were full of tears (泪 - *namida*).

Beauty, in Japanese aesthetics, is not only youthful and vital beauty, but also is beauty of fading and separation. Falling cherry petals give people a sense of a gentle flutter that they call *aware*. Basho's haiku always expresses this fragile and impermanent sadness. The separation in the spring left sadness in their eyes. The preoccupation for the impermanent nature of beauty in Japanese poetry in general and Basho poetry in particular originates from the notion of impermanent life of Buddhist spirit. Japanese people are sad but not agonizing because they have understood the impermanence nature of human life. *Aware* means that.

4.3. Iteration

The iteration is an artistic method that poets iterate a certain word or phrase to express honest or emphasize the vividness and freshness of reality. Buson's following poem describes the spring seascape:

春の海終日のたりのたりかな (Buson)

Spring sea / is abundant, is abundant / throughout the day.

The iteration of の た り の た り words evokes the voices of abundantly youthful spring waves, rushing to the shore. The iteration of word in the poem created a unique melody for haiku even though the amount of words allowed to use in poetry is extremely limited.

The use of the iteration represents the linguistic proficiency of haijins. Only haijins with linguistic proficiency can create such very musical short poems.

4.4. Metonymy

A metonymy is a tactic that poets use the word indicating A to express B based on a certain relationship. Using metonymy creates multiple meanings for poetry. Because of the requirement of using the language, haiku often uses metonymy. Every word for indirect season is a metonymy:

秋十とせ却て江戸を指古郷 (Basho, 1684)

Ten autumns / Edo has become / My hometown.

In the above poem, the ten-autumn image (秋十 - akito) is exemplified only ten years Basho lives and settles in Edo. Japan has four seasons. In principle, it is possible to take any season to refer to his time in Edo. But why does Basho use autumn? It was because of the autumn - the mist season - helped him express his mood in those ten years. Living ten years, but he felt that Edo was unfamiliar, still just “strange land”. Only when he came back to visit his hometown, in a moment of turning back, the city was farther behind, he suddenly felt Edo become close as a native. The poem speaks of the psychological law:

When we live, the land is just where we live

When we leave, the land has become the soul.

(Che Lan Vien – *Singing of the Ship*)

4.5. Opposition

The poet puts together two contradictory objects in order to highlight one of the two objects. We enjoy the following poem:

荒海や佐渡によこたふ天河 (Basho, 1689)

A rough rolling sea / Above Sado Island / Lies the River of Heaven.

Watching Sado Island, Basho realized that the sea and the *River of Heaven* were so contradictory. While the sea is noisy and loquacious, thousands of stars still quietly shining in the night. What does Basho want to say through these two opposing images? In fact, words have an important role in expressing ideas. It is the main tool for people to communicate daily. Therefore, people always imagine life through words. However, words are only words, not vivid reality. Too dependent on words, words will become a curtain separating people from reality, which its essence is a deep silence. Therefore, Zen Buddhism advocates “not writing texts, Dharma is transmitted outside scriptures”. Basho's poem expresses the principle of Zen in particular, of the religions in general. This is also

what Chuang Tzu once wrote: “Having words, is of thought; getting the thought, let forget the words. We find people who forget words, to talk together!” (Trang Tu, 2001, p 281).

Conclusion

Japanese classical haiku has its own characteristics of poetics: nothingness structure, simple rules, and micro artistic space – time. Artistic tactics are used selectively and creatively. These create a spirit that Japanese people have been promoting. That is wabi - simplicity and frugality. The form is not gaudy and not elaborate. The haiku contains profound content, profound meditations that are very practical, close, and meaningful to the present life. That is why haiku was born more than four centuries ago, but it still grows continuously in today's life flow.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare.

REFERENCES

- Blyth, R. H. (1960). *Japanese Life and Character in Senryu*, Hokuseido, Tokyo.
- Nhat Chieu. (1994). *Basho and haiku*. Literature Publishing House.
- Nhat Chieu. (2012). Understanding Japanese haiku. *Huong River Magazine*, May 7, 2012.
- Nguyễn Thị Bích Hải. (2013). The similarities and differences of the three great poems, haiku and green bowl. Retrieved September 21 from <https://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn>, 2013 - 04:33.
- Nguyễn Khắc Phi, Trần Đình Su. (1997). *Poetics of Tang poem*. Da Nang Publishing House.
- Nguyễn Thị Thanh Xuân. (2011). Haiku and continental poetry, something noted, Proceedings of *Japanese and Vietnamese Literature in the East Asian Context* workshops. University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City National University.
- Stewart, H. (1973). *A Net of Fireflies Japanese Haiku Paintings*. Charles E. Tuttle Company; Tokyo, Japan.
- Suzuki, D. T. (2019). *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Hong Duc Publishing House.
- Trang Tu. (2001). *Nam Hoa Kinh*. Translated by Nhuong Tong. Literature Publishing House.

THI PHÁP THƠ HAIKU CỔ ĐIỂN NHẬT BẢN

Nguyễn Thị Mai Liên

Trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội

Tác giả liên hệ: Nguyễn Thị Mai Liên – Email: mailien.edu@gmail.com

Ngày nhận bài: 03-4-2019; ngày nhận bài sửa: 05-5-2019; ngày duyệt đăng: 10-6-2019

TÓM TẮT

Thơ haiku (俳句 *hài cú*) được ví như kì hoa dị thảo trong nền thi ca Nhật Bản nói riêng và vườn thơ nhân loại nói chung. Trên phương diện thi pháp, haiku có nhiều điểm độc đáo về kết cấu, luật thơ, không gian – thời gian nghệ thuật và các thủ pháp nghệ thuật. Haiku biểu đạt một tình thần mỹ học mà người Nhật đề cao, đó là wabi – sự đơn sơ, thanh đạm. Hình thức tuy không cầu kì, trau chuốt nhưng thơ haiku hàm chứa những nội dung uyên áo, những thiển ý sâu xa mà hết sức gần gũi, có ý nghĩa với đời sống hiện tại.

Từ khóa: Văn học Nhật Bản, haiku, thi pháp, nguyên lí Thiền.