

# Richard Wright's Haiku, Japanese Poetics, and Classical Chinese Poetry

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## Introduction

Around two years before his death, Richard Wright, one of the most well-known African-American writers in the twentieth-century, became fascinated with haiku through his introduction to Sinclair Beiles, a young South African writer in Paris. Wright wrote more than four thousand haiku, of which 817 were collected in *Haiku: This Other World*, published posthumously in 1998. This collection is doubtlessly a significant addition to the Wright Studies.

Though impressed with haiku writing, Wright had to take up additional work to meet his expenses after the summer of 1959, struggle against constant bouts of amebic dysentery, and live alone after his wife and daughters left for Britain. He never gave up writing haiku “born of a tormented soul confronted with hardship” (Fabre, *Quest* 488) because, like a consolation or a healing power, it gave him a feeling of sensitiveness and a temporary peace of mind during his illness and loneliness. In his letter of April 8, 1960 to Margrit de Sabloniere, Wright talked about his sensitiveness to haiku: “These haikus, as you know, were written out of my illness. I was and am, so damnably sensitive. Never was I so sensitive as when my intestines were raw. So along came that Japanese poetry and harnessed this nervous energy” (Fabre, *Quest* 508). Once he found haiku, Wright could not stop digging into it, as he admitted in his letter of September 1960 to Margrit de Sabloniere: “I’ve finished nothing this year but those damned haikus. . . . I’ll sit down one of these days and go over them, that is, reread them and see how they sound.”<sup>1</sup>

That Wright wrote four thousand haiku during his illness also shows that his anger, which prevails in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, was gradually replaced with a tender feeling of sensibility to both nature and human nature, as he confesses in haiku 721:

As my anger ebbs,  
The spring stars grow bright again  
And the wind returns.

The sentiment expressed above indicates at once that haiku, as a poetic form that focuses on human relationship with nature, rekindles Wright's sensibility and tenderness to both nature and human nature, and his obsessive haiku writing makes him sensitive to the rediscovery of such a relationship. During this writing process, Wright has a chance to be imbued with Japanese poetry and Zen Buddhism. A Zen teaching says, "Seek within, you are the Buddha." Haiku 721 reflects Wright's search for self-enlightenment. When he is enlightened, he sees nature with a new vision, as suggested in the following haiku:

An empty sickbed:  
An indented white pillow  
In weak winter sun. (425)

In this haiku the empty sickbed is juxtaposed with the weak winter sun to create a world where Wright attains satori, which means in Zen "as the state of *mu*, nothingness, which is absolutely free of any thought or emotion" (Hakutani and Tener 250). This juxtaposition reflects the *mu* or the forgetting of personal emotion.

Haiku 1 is another good example that shows how Japanese aesthetics and Zen philosophy influence Wright in the process of awakening to the human relationship with nature:

I am nobody:

A red sinking autumn sun

Took my name away.

The first line reveals the speaker's feeling of loss, but his sensibility to the human affinity with nature may heal that loss. In the human world, his name may be forgotten, but in the other world—the eternal world, his name will be eternal for it becomes part of the sun. This haiku speaks of Wright's rediscovery of his true self and poetic spirit for perfect integration with nature, that is, the state of *mu* or nothingness.

This essay focuses on Wright's haiku that reveal their resemblances to classical Chinese poetry and the Japanese influence, mainly through Basho, on his haiku. The translations of the Chinese poems discussed are mine.

### Resemblances of Wright's Haiku to Classical Chinese Poetry

Chester Himes has said in an interview that Wright's work belongs to “a literature for the world” (Fabre and Skinner 7), and I think this work should include his haiku. The four thousand haiku Wright wrote indicate that he surely has a close literary kinship with Japanese poetry; however, some of his haiku may exhibit a distant kinship with classical Chinese poetry. To analyze Wright's poetic resemblances, it is, therefore, necessary to discuss some typical characteristics of classical Chinese poetry.

First of all, it is juxtaposition. In classical Chinese poetry, the desired juxtaposition requires a strict symmetrical contrast of images in a couplet. Take, for instance, the following couplet from the Tang Dynasty poet Lu Lun's quatrain, “Lament for Autumn with Li Yi” (同李益伤秋):

岁去人头白，秋来树叶黄。(Liu 63)

Time passes: the hair turns white,

Autumn arrives: the leaves turn yellow.

The first line has a reference to the human world, and the second to the natural world. The juxtaposition not only cuts the couplet into two parts but also engages in a comparison between the two images it separates, implying that the second represents the poetic essence of the first and sets up an internal comparison for the reader. Here, autumn indicates loneliness and sadness about old age, and the transference of the white hair to the yellow leaves intensifies the solitude of a man in decrepitude. Similarly, in Japanese haiku, autumn is a season word that also indicates loneliness, and a *kireji* or a cutting word is used to juxtapose the two parts.

Terseness is another characteristic of classical Chinese poetry that challenges a poet to use only laconic phrases or incomplete sentences in juxtaposition so as to produce a perfect symmetrical contrast for a strikingly visual effect. Consider, for example, the following couplet from the Tang Dynasty poet Sikong Shu's poem, "Enjoying the Stay of My Cousin Lu Lun" (喜外弟卢纶见宿):

雨中黄叶树，灯下白头人。(Xu, Lu, and Wu 230)

The yellow-leaf tree in the rain,

The white-haired man by the lamp.

For effective contrast, the neat juxtaposition of the first phrase to the second presents a visual feeling of loneliness. The first line records the poet's observation, and the second suggests an effect of that observation through an imaginative association it creates. This kind of juxtaposition produces an internal comparison in which the similar characteristics are equated in two different images, but each exists in its own right. Here, the natural scene offers an evocative setting for an implicit human situation in an empathetic way. It is easy to see how the use of this technique

helps underscore the dynamic interrelationship between nature and human nature in classical Chinese poetry.

An obvious example of juxtaposition in Ezra Pound's imagist couplet, "In a Station of the Metro," clearly shows its similarity to Sikong Shu's couplet. When he hear a story about the haiku "The footsteps of the cat upon the snow: / Plum-blossoms" and recollects Takeari Arakida's "The fallen blossom flies back to its branch: / A butterfly,"<sup>2</sup> Pound finds the best way to superpose and revises his thirty-line poem into the present version:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound credits his "theory of superposition" to Japanese haiku: "The 'one-image poem' is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 89). What is Pound's one-image? It can be the underlying meaning brought to the fore through juxtaposition of the two major images (apparition of faces and petals). When the "faces" act as the tenor and "petals" as the vehicle, the force of internal comparison creates an imaginative effect on the reader to complete the incomplete.

Furthermore, Pound's juxtaposition of faces to petals is not unfamiliar to Chinese readers. It suggests an echo of the Tang Dynasty poet Cui Hu's quatrain, "The Village South of the Capital" (题都城南庄):

去年今日此门中，人面桃花相映红。

人面不知何处去，桃花依旧笑春风。(Ge and Cang 58)

On this day last year behind this gate,

Your face blushed among peach petals.

Now your face is nowhere to be seen

While peach petals smile like before in spring breeze.

The poem juxtaposes the girl's likeness to the peach petals to produce a feeling of love in the first couplet, but the second expresses sadness at the sight of peach petals without the presence of the girl whom the speaker misses. The source of this poem is as follows: One spring day, the poet goes to a village south of the capital to enjoy the view of sprouting grass. Because he is thirsty, he knocks on a villager's door for a cup of water. A girl comes to offer him water and then stands by a blossoming peach tree. The next year, the poet, who can never forget the sight of the girl standing by the peach tree, goes there again, but he cannot find the girl anymore. Thus disappointed, he writes a poem on the closed door to express his feeling. Since then, in Chinese literature, the comparison of the face to the peach petal has been used as a phrase—人面桃花 (the peach blossom face)—to suggest feminine beauty or the impermanence of beauty like that of a peach petal.

Of Wright's haiku, two deserve a discussion. Haiku 626, like Pound's "Metro" poem, seems an echo or an imitation of Takeari Arakida's haiku:

Off the cherry tree,

One twig and its red blossom

Flies into the sun.

The difference between Arakida's and Wright's haiku is that the former imagines the fallen petal as a butterfly returning to the branch while the latter imagines the blossoming twig as a bird flying into the sun. By borrowing Arakida's mode of expression, Wright creates an interaction of things for a harmony or yin yang of heaven and earth.

Similar to Pound's "Metro" poem, haiku 362 is an appropriate example of juxtaposition with a use of a semicolon in the first line:

The drone of spring rain;  
A lonely old woman strokes  
The fur of her cat. (362)

The transference of the senses from the droning rain to the woman's stroking the cat's fur makes her loneliness stronger.

It is not difficult, however, to trace Wright's haiku to classical Chinese poems. For example, the following haiku may be an echo of a couplet by Meng Haoran, a Tang Dynasty poet:

There is where I am:—  
Summer sunset loneliness,  
Purple meeting red. (302)

Wright juxtaposes the speaker's loneliness upon the summer sunset, yet the cheerful colors of purple and red show that he has overcome his lonely feelings with some insight into his co-existence with nature. The speaker is lonely, and so in his eyes, the summer sunset is lonely too, but this empathy of loneliness, when meeting nature, becomes colorful and brilliant. Moreover, Wright's haiku 302 implies that he gains a new understanding of loneliness for he attains the state of *mu* or nothingness, that is, loneliness in loneliness.

Now, let's see a couplet from Meng Haoran's quatrain, "Mooring on the Jiande River" (宿建德江):

移舟泊烟渚，日暮客愁新。(Ge and Cang 2)

While I moor my boat by a mist-veiled island,

My loneliness arrives at sunset.

The couplet describes the grief of a solitary traveler who moors by a misty island with loneliness rising to take hold of him. It suggests two kinds of loneliness: loneliness of the traveler and that of nature embodied in sunset. The speaker's loneliness becomes intense through the setting of the sun.

Loneliness is always a favorite theme in classical Chinese poetry, especially when it is associated with the season of autumn. The following couplet from “Night Moor by the Maple Bridge” (枫桥夜泊), a quatrain by Zhang Ji, a Tang Dynasty poet, is an example:

月落乌啼霜满天，江枫渔火对愁眠。(Ge and Cang 39)

The moon goes down, crows caw, frost takes the sky,

River maples and fishing lanterns weave in sleepy loneliness.

However, loneliness obtained from loneliness is also presented to suggest the state of *mu* in classical Chinese poetry, as in “Poem on Autumn” (秋词), a quatrain by Liu Yuxi, a Tang Dynasty poet:

自古逢秋悲寂寥，我言秋日胜春朝。

晴空一鹤排云上，便引诗情到碧霄。(Ge and Cang 63)

Since ancient times loneliness has been autumn lament,

But I say autumn is far better than spring.

In the fine sky a crane soars high above the clouds,

Taking my poetic feeling up to the blue space.

This poem doubtlessly offers a new vision of autumn that loneliness transforms into a positive attitude toward the world. Similarly, Wright expresses his attitude toward autumn in a positive tone:



Golden afternoon:

Tree leaves are visiting me

In their yellow clothes. (666)

Li Po, one of the most famous poets in the Tang Dynasty, presents his idea of loneliness in a quatrain, “Sitting Alone toward the Jingting Hill” (独坐敬亭山):

众鸟高飞尽，孤云独去闲。

相看两不厌，只有敬亭山。(Ge and Cang 23)

All the birds have flown high and away,

A lonely cloud is wandering off free.

We look at each other without boredom,

It's you, the Jingting Hill.

In Li Po's poem the lonely speaker finds comfort in the Jingting Hill and transforms his loneliness into a state of loneliness or unity with nature. This unity reflects the Chinese poetic notion of integration of emotion and scene, as Wang Fuzhi (1619-92) remarks:

Whatever thing there is outside, there can be a counterpart in man's inner being; whatever emotion there is in man's inner being, there must be the thing outside [to match it] . . . . If we go through the things of the world, we will see that, whatever our emotion is, it cannot be without a suitable correlative outside” (Sun 660).

Here is another haiku by Wright that refers to loneliness in loneliness:

Summer mountains move

To let a sinking sun pass

To the other side. (550)

As an expression of pure sensibility to nature, this haiku resembles Li Po's poem on watching

the Jingting Hill. In the acting of watching, the speaker forgets his loneliness by imagining that the mountains move to make way for the passing of the sinking sun. In the following haiku, Wright transfers loneliness to nature in exchange for a feeling of forgetfulness:

And also tonight,  
The same evening star above  
The same apple tree. (639)

However, Wright's kinship with classical Chinese poems through Basho is revealed in the following example, a couplet from an untitled quatrain by Du Fu, a Tang Dynasty poet as famous as Li Po:

江碧鸟逾白，山青花欲燃。(Ge and Cang 37)  
Blue river, the birds look white,  
Green mountains, the flowers seem fiery.

Du Fu uses the visual images of four colors to create a contrast that presents beauty of nature. Through this delightful observation, he harmonizes into nature his loneliness expressed in the second couplet of the quatrain:

今春看又过，何日是归年？  
I've seen these again this spring,  
But which year will I go home?

Now, read Basho's haiku that resembles the first line of Du Fu's quatrain:

Darkening waves—  
cry of wild ducks,  
faintly white. (Basho 38)

This presents the speaker's observation in which the transference of the senses helps create an atmosphere of loneliness. During his early years of haiku writing, Basho's style of composition inclined toward Du Fu's poetry. He was encouraged to use Chinese expressions and incorporated many of them in his haiku (Fujikawa 374-75).

Wright's haiku 584 is a close imitation of Basho's haiku cited above:

From the rainy dark  
Comes faint white cries of wild geese,—  
How lonely it is.

In Wright's haiku, loneliness becomes visible and audible through the color of white cries of wild geese against the background of the rainy darkness that further makes the speaker's lonely feeling heavier. In fact, Wright's haiku is identical to Basho's. In an indirect way, it is also an echo of Du Fu's couplet.

Now, let us read a few more classical Chinese poems to which Wright's haiku may bear resemblances. First, "The West Creek at Chuzhou" (滁州西涧), a quatrain by Wei Yingwu, also a Tang Dynasty poet:

独怜幽草涧边生, 上有黄鹂深树鸣。  
春潮带雨晚来急, 野渡无人舟自横。(Ge and Cang 41)  
I love the grass growing unnoticed along the creek,  
And the orioles chirping in deep trees.  
The flash flood is rapid with spring rain at dusk,  
And a sampan turns itself by the deserted pier.

Wright's haiku 505 shares a similar expression with the second couplet of Wei Yingwu's poem:

An empty canoe

Turning slowly on a river

In the autumn rain.

The difference of the two poems is in the tone. While Wei Yingwu's poem describes a delightful scene of spring, Wright's haiku presents a different situation that connotes a feeling of loneliness through the season of autumn and the image of an empty canoe. Nevertheless, Wright shares a similar way with Wei Yingwu in describing the movement of a boat.

The next resemblance we consider is that of Wright's haiku 210 and 80 to "The Garden That Doesn't Welcome a Visitor" (游园不值), a poem by Ye Shaoweng, a Song Dynasty poet:

应怜屐齿印苍苔，小扣柴扉久不开。

春色满园关不住，一枝红杏出墙来。(Ge and Cang 171)

In fear that the clogs may tread the green moss,

The wooden door keeps shut against my gentle knocks.

But the color of spring cannot be closed within the garden—

A sprig of red apricot peeps over the wall.

Wright's haiku for comparison:

The sprinting spring rain

Knocks upon a wooden door

That has just been shut. (210)

After the rainstorm,

A tendril of Wisteria

Peeps over the wall. (80)

Haiku 210 and 80 are a perfect pair for comparison to the Chinese poem. The former shares a similar expression with the second line of Ye Shaoweng's quatrain, and the latter resembles the

last line of the quatrain in describing the flower peeping over the wall in springtime. Both poets use the symbolism of a single sprig or a tendril to suggest the coming of spring and to express their joy when spotting the flower. The only difference between the poems is that while Ye Shaoweng implies that the visitor is not welcomed by the garden owner, Wright means that the storm cannot destroy the life of a wisteria.

The following poetic line of a classical Chinese poem (author unknown) is echoed by both Basho's and Wright's haiku:

踏花归来马蹄香

Back from flower-viewing, the horseshoe is scented.

There is a story about using this poetic line in a painting competition initiated by an emperor of the Song Dynasty. The painters feel it easy to draw flowers and a horse, but the abstract idea of "scent," which is hard to draw, challenges them. Some draw a man holding a flower on horseback, some draw a few petals under the horseshoes, but one painter shows his unique imagination. He draws a couple of butterflies following a shoe of a trotting horse to make the intangible scent tangible, thus winning the competition and the favor of the emperor. This story tells that the importance of painting lies in creative thinking, suggestive way of expression and unique imagination, and that a painter should be able to draw out the meaning beyond words. As for poetic creation, a poet should have the ability to use images to present ideas in a fresh way.

Here is one of Basho's haiku that shows a strong echo of the Chinese "Back from Flower-viewing" mentioned above:

In the garden  
a sweaty shoe—scent  
of chrysanthemum. (Basho 74)

The next two haiku by Wright can be explained by referring to both the classical Chinese poetic line of “back from flower-viewing, the horseshoe is scented” and Basho’s “In the garden” haiku:

In a misty rain  
A butterfly is riding  
The tail of a cow. (17)

Coming from the woods,  
A bull has a lilac sprig  
Dangling from a horn. (175)

Wright may not know the classical Chinese poetic line, but Basho, who studied classical Chinese poetry during his early writing career, should certainly know. It may be safe to assume that since Basho’s haiku bears a direct resemblance to classical Chinese poetry, Wright’s haiku too, through Basho’s influence, may bear this resemblance.

While it is evident that Wright becomes fascinated with haiku through the introduction of Sinclair Beiles to R.H. Blyth’s four volumes of *Haiku*, he may have read Ezra Pound in his early writing career in Chicago and had a momentary contact with haiku or Imagist poems. An interview by Roy Wilder with Wright, published in *New York Herald Tribune* on August 17, 1941, notes that while working in the post office in Chicago, Wright gets into a habit of reading “T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Joseph Wood Krutch and Aldous Huxley” (Kinnamon and Fabre 38). His reading, which may have included Pound’s haiku-like poems and translations of Chinese poetry, could have been the seed that sprouted when he began writing the most beautiful poems in his dying years.

Moreover, Margaret Walker also notes that Wright “felt a close affinity to all modern poets and their poetry and read poetry with a passion—Shakespeare, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, and Walt Whitman. He read all the poetry he could put his hands on. Because he never learned a foreign language he had to read most foreign poets in translation, but he read them” (313). Walker’s assertion may also offer a clue that Wright may have read haiku through Pound before he was introduced to reading Blyth’s *Haiku*, but to say that Wright must have been influenced by Pound and classical Chinese poetry would be arbitrary. However, the haiku moments recorded by Wright, together with Basho’s, do reverberate with classical Chinese poems discussed earlier. Maybe poets in different times think alike, but I am inclined to think that the influence of classical Chinese poetry on Basho may have been passed on in a subtle way to Wright even without his awareness.

## 2. The Japanese Influence on Wright’s Haiku

Since Wright has read Blyth’s four volumes of *Haiku* with great enthusiasm and written more than four thousand haiku of his own, the influence of Japanese poetry and philosophy on Wright’s work is apparent. Among the Japanese poets, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) is probably the most important influence. Basho, as a sensitive observer of nature, records impressions of his sensibility in his haiku and, more significantly, in his famous travelogue, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Imbued with his observation of nature, he uses colors to produce the visual effect. For instance,

Irises blooming  
from my feet—  
sandals laced in blue. (Basho 75)

The color blue becomes a background that expresses a genuinely human joy with nature. This haiku is evocative of his other haiku, “In the garden,” and the classical Chinese poetic line, “Back from flower-viewing, the horseshoe is scented,” discussed previously.

In a similar way, Wright, as a haiku practitioner, records his observation that echoes Basho’s:

I laid down my book:

A tendril of Wisteria

Encircling my leg. (110)

Wright’s haiku shows a trace of imitation of Basho’s in its description of delightful surprise. This description also shows that the poet’s careful observation is the much necessary process of awareness that nature is the stimulation of human nature. Through this process, Wright gives concrete, symbolic meaning to his sensibility.

Obviously, Wright’s haiku incorporate many of Basho’s expressions. Haiku 316 is an interesting one that refers to Bashō’s influence on him in the use of contrast:

In the silent forest

A woodpecker hammers at

The sound of silence.

The poet sets up a contrast between the silence of the forest and the knocking of a woodpecker. Silence, which is commonly felt, transforms into a sound through the hammering of the bird. The contrast is effective; however, the weakness of this haiku is in the use of an adjective, “silent,” in the first line, awkward with six syllables and wordy because the noun “silence” appears in the third line. If the first line reads as “In the morning woods,” it can avoid wordiness and thus



follow the 5-7-5 haiku pattern. This haiku is reminiscent of Basho's most famous frogpond haiku in the similar mode of expression:

Old pond,  
leap-splash—  
a frog. (Basho 58)

In comparison to Wright's haiku, Basho's is strong in suggesting silence through "leap-splash."

Wright's haiku is also reminiscent of Basho's famous cicada haiku:

How quiet—  
locust-shrill  
pierces rock. (Basho 40)

In *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a passage preceding the cicada haiku records Basho's momentary impression of stillness during his visit to a mountain temple:

In Yamagata there was a mountain temple, the Ryushakuji, founded by the high priest Jikaku, an especially pure and tranquil place. People had urged us to see this place at least once, so we backtracked from Obanazawa, a distance of about seven leagues. It was still light when we arrived. We borrowed a room at a temple at the mountain foot and climbed to the Buddha hall at the top. Boulders were piled on boulders; the pines and cypress had grown old; the soil and rocks were aged, covered with smooth moss. The doors to the temple buildings at the top were closed, not a sound to be heard. I followed the edge of the cliff, crawling over the boulders, and then prayed at the Buddhist hall. It was a stunning scene wrapped in quiet—I felt my spirit being purified. (translation by Haruo Shirane)<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Basho's cicada haiku may have the reference to a poetic line from cicadas of Wang Ji, a Chinese poet of the Nan Dynasty: “蝉噪林愈静” (Cicadas' shrill: silence of the woods is deeper). Both Basho and Wang Ji emphasize the tranquility of nature, but their focal points are different. While Wang Ji uses the shrill of cicadas to expand the quiet of the woods, Basho uses the stillness of the rock to set up a contrast to the sound of cicadas.

Now let's read another haiku by Basho:

Autumn moon,  
tide foams to  
the very gate. (Basho 58)

and one of Wright's haiku that bears a resemblance:

The spring flood waters  
Lap slowly at the doorsteps, —  
A radiant moon. (469)

While Basho's haiku suggests a slight feeling of loneliness with the use of autumn, it creates an effective interplay of visual and auditory senses through the watching and listening of the speaker. Similarly, Wright's haiku 469 focuses on the essence of a moment when nature is related to the human world through the images that appeal to both visual and auditory senses.

The spring flood seen by the speaker transfers to the sound of the lapping moon at the doorsteps, and this transference leaves a space for the sensible imagination that both the flood and the moon are lapping and radiant.

Let's consider another haiku by Basho:

Not one traveler  
braves this road—

autumn night. (Basho 56)

and two by Wright that are evocative of Basho's:

That road is empty,  
The one leading into hills  
In autumn twilight. (136)

Autumn moonlight is  
Deepening the emptiness  
Of a country road. (501)

In both Basho's and Wright's haiku, loneliness is intensified with an emphasis on emptiness of the road in autumn. Basho's haiku suggests a traveler's fear of being alone on the road while Wright's two haiku, though catching the essence of Basho's mode of expression of loneliness, center on loneliness only. According to Donald Keene, suggestion is one of the four Japanese aesthetics and a major element of a poem's beauty (295). The inclusion of the empty road leading into hills in autumn twilight or emptiness deepening on the country road does reflect the Japanese poetic spirit and power of suggestion.

Wright must have been quite impressed by the image of an empty road, which he uses in other haiku of his. For instance,

Just one lonely road  
Stretching into the shadows  
Of a summer night. (499)

A long empty road

Under a lowering sky  
In a winter dawn. (503)

This autumn evening  
Is full of an empty sky  
And one empty road. (787)

These haiku show evidences of the influence of the *sabi* haiku style, which is one of Basho's major haiku characteristics. By using *sabi* and suggestion, the poet associates loneliness with his self-content of life, that is, loneliessness in loneliness. "*Sabi* is traditionally associated with loneliness. Aesthetically, however, this mode of sensibility smacks of grace rather than splendor; it suggests quiet beauty as opposed to robust beauty" (Hakutani and Tener 259). A further evidence of Basho's influence on Wright is significant. Read Basho's famous crow haiku:

On the dead limb  
squats a crow—  
autumn night. (Bashō 35)

This haiku focuses on a crow's solitary moment, but in a deeper sense, it presents a posture of the poet's contented loneliness with nature. The transcendent change from the crow's loneliness to Basho's suggests the poet's enlightenment. Aesthetically speaking, it is his ideal of loneliness and his realization that all in nature exists in a state of *sabi* and relatedness. In haiku, relatedness is that "two entirely different things are joined in sameness: spirit and matter, present and future, doer and deed, word and thing, meaning and sensation" (Hakutani and Tener 253). In the crow haiku the dead limb, solitary crow and autumn night all share a spirit of sameness, and the joint

of this sameness is to create an evocative or correlative atmosphere of loneliness in nature and human nature.

Wright's haiku 141 resembles Basho's crow haiku:

An autumn sunset:

A buzzard sails slowly past,

Not flapping its wings.

In contrast to Basho's crow in a static posture of meditation, Wright's buzzard presents a movement. Yet, both create a sense of relatedness from thing (crow / buzzard) to thing (autumn night / autumn sunset) in nature and, in a suggestive way, from nature to human nature. Wright's haiku shows that he is an ardent imitator who is receptive to both the Japanese haiku technique and Zen philosophy. In haiku 141, a sense of loneliness obtained by the observer at autumn sunset suggests a sense of loneliessness in the state of nothingness. In other words, it shows that Wright, being free of personal emotion, presents an aesthetic sensibility of loneliessness and selflessness with nature and thus reaches the spiritual height of *sabi*.

Now let's come back to Basho's crow haiku. It has a thematic reference to ancient Chinese paintings of crows on old branches such as 枯木寒鸦图 [A Crow on an Old Branch (Winter)]. Haruo Shirane has noted that

Basho first completed this haiku in the spring of 1681, during his late Chinese-style period . . . the poem was written on a seasonal topic closely associated with Fujiwara Shunzei (d. 1204) and his medieval aesthetics of quiet, meditative loneliness. Crows perched on a withered branch . . . was a popular subject in Chinese ink painting. In this context, Bashō's haiku juxtaposes a medieval poetic

topic with a Chinese painting motif, causing the two to resonate in montage fashion.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the adoption of the image of crow from the Chinese ink painting helps Basho create a resonance between the tangible landscape and the intangible atmosphere of loneliness.

Basho’s haiku may also have an echo of “Autumn Thoughts” (《秋思》) by Ma Zhyuan, a poet of the Yuan Dynasty:

枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马。夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯。(He 218)

On an old tree

thick with withered rattan:

evening crows.

A small bridge

spans the stream and

a house leans

by a worn path.

Against west wind

a thin horse and

a crushed traveler—

the sinking sun

at the skyline.

This translation is done by using the haiku format for comparison. The images in the original would read as “withered rattan, old tree, evening crows; small bridge, flowing stream, someone’s house, worn path, west wind, thin horse; sunset in the west, a crushed traveler at the skyline.” If we pick images from only the first and last stanzas, we see a picture of Basho’s crow haiku.

Although metaphor is seldom used in haiku writing, some haiku can be read as extended metaphors that express human feelings. Basho expresses his loneliness through the image of a caged cricket for an internal comparison in the following haiku:

Loneliness—  
caged cricket dangling  
from the wall. (Bashō 62)

Images in lines 2 and 3 of this haiku accomplish the abstract feeling of loneliness. To better understand the internal comparison, “is” or “is like” can be added to make the haiku into a complete sentence with a metaphor or a simile. Wright, while suffering from loneliness after his wife and daughters moved to London, writes one similar to Basho’s in expressing the mood:

One vanishing ship  
On an autumn horizon:  
How lonely it is. (608)

The symbolic meaning is clear in this haiku. The nature we perceive is a concrete form that conveys feelings. The contrast between a ship and the horizon expands the feeling of loneliness. Empathetically, this is a seascape of loneliness visualized in autumn.

Below are two more haiku for comparison. Basho’s haiku:

Come, let’s go  
snow-viewing

till we're buried. (Basho 55)

and Wright's:

In the falling snow

A laughing boy holds out his palms

Until they are white. (31)

Basho's haiku focuses on a happy moment of snow-viewing, a moment of eager involvement of the viewers. In the same way, Wright's haiku presents a moment of joy with snow through the boy's laughter, and its pattern of expression shows his imitation of Basho. However, according to Michel Fabre's thoughtful analysis, Wright's haiku 31 probably expresses a different view of snow through the connotation of "white" and with consideration of his cultural background:

It is clear that the snow represents winter, but as a joyous season. Yet a hidden clue may reserve the symbolism. If the boy is black, his joy in touching the immaculately white flakes is perhaps accompanied by a desire to be like them, like his palms which are lighter than the rest of his body. Hence the somewhat pathetic quality of the poem read as an attempt by the boy to forget his blackness.

The effect is entirely different if the snow is seen as a symbol of fundamental human quality, in that everyone, covered with snow, is the same color. (Fabre,

*Quest* 506)

If it is "the same color," can we assume that white is colorless? Technically, white, like black, is an achromatic color. If so, the combination of black and white with snow covering the palms may suggest the desire for racial harmony or the poet's wish to have a harmonious moment with nature to forget his skin color even though such integration still faces challenge in reality.



Although Wright is indebted to Basho, it is not quite difficult to trace in his haiku the influence of other Japanese poets such as Issa. For comparison, read this haiku by Issa:

For you fleas too,  
The night must be long,  
It must be lonely. (Blyth 318)

and this one by Wright:

For you, O gulls,  
I order slaty waters  
And this leaden sky! (2)

Wright's haiku bears a close resemblance to Issa's. Issa uses the image of flea to express the human loneliness. Similarly, Wright uses the images of gulls, slaty waters and leaden sky to create a visual effect of loneliness. The exclamation mark gives a tone that makes this lonely feeling heavier.

Read another haiku by Issa:

Do not ever strike!  
The fly moves as if to pray  
With his hands and feet. (Hakutani and Tener 225)

and Wright's two haiku that echo Issa's:

A fly crawls slowly  
Over a sticky paper,—  
How chilly the dawn! (295)

Two flies locked in love

Were hit by a newspaper  
And died together. (486)

According to Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, Wright expresses in haiku 295 his sympathy to a fly that is reminiscent of Issa's famous fly haiku: "In Issa's haiku, the negative particle attached to the verb 'strike' functions as a cutting word. In Wright's haiku, the final line with 'how' and an exclamation mark accomplishes the same effect" (225). Ironically, in haiku 486, the cruel speaker, instead of leaving the flies alone, hits them to death, and the tone shows that he enjoys doing so. This haiku is evocative of the rat killed by Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the cat hanged by Wright in his autobiographical novel, *Black Boy*.

In all, the above comparisons prove that the influence of Japanese haiku and Zen Buddhism on Wright is significant. "Influence," as A. Owen Aldridge discusses, "is the reflection of the style or thought of one author in the work of a subsequent one. The reflected elements would not have existed in the second author had he or she not read his predecessor and been sufficiently impressed to follow the latter's example" (43). As a matter of fact, Wright's mass production of haiku can be considered a result of influence of world literature and the cross-cultural pollination therein.

### Conclusion

A few days before his death, Wright was interviewed by Frank Tenot, who said he saw the novelist in Wright, "but through the novelist, the jazz lover" (Kinnamon and Fabre 242). What would Wright say if he was told he was a haiku lover? There is no question that Wright devoted his life to haiku writing in the final stage of his life. Wright may have felt exhausted from his illness, his solitude, and his unyielding battle against racial injustice, but he gains a new

understanding of himself and of the world through haiku writing, and thus he eases his mind and attains the spiritual harmony with nature. His journey toward finding a haiku moment of enlightenment is best expressed in haiku 3:

Keep straight down this block,  
Then turn right where you will find  
A peach tree blooming.

Basho died at the age of 50. In his deathbed, at the request of his disciples, he wrote his last haiku:

Sick on a journey—  
over parched fields  
dreams wander on. (Basho 81)

Basho's dreams should be his poetic spirit that has harmonized into nature and human nature. On November 28, 1960, Wright died at the age of 52. his life burned out like a candle, as predicted in haiku 647:

Burning out its time,  
And timing its own burning,  
One lonely candle.

Wright burned out with his haiku spirit. However, his haiku, though departing with the use of certain haiku techniques, demonstrate a state of mind of nothingness and reestablish his positive attitude toward life. A treasure for scholarly research and common reading in modern American literature, Wright's haiku still vibrate with his poetic spirit and human tenderness; his dreams of the other world wander on.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished letter to Margrit de Sabloniere, September 23, 1960. Wright Archive, Yale University Library. Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985. p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> According to Sanehide Kodama, “one of the haiku Pound had in mind was that of Takeari Arakida (not Moritake Arakidaas erroneously known, especially abroad): ‘The fallen blossom flies back to its branch: A butterfly.’” *American Poetry and Japanese Culture*. Hamden: Archon, 1984. p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Haruo Shirane’s translation of the passage from *Narrow Road to the Deep North* is in Volume D of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* edited by David Damrosch. p. 425.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

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