

## Shiki - Haiku Reformation

*Shiki Masaoka Was a Fighter and Radical  
Banned from Public Speaking at 15; Failed College by 1892*

by Don Baird

When studying Shiki (1867-1902), his Japan, and its relationship to the rest of the world, the Tokugawa policy of seclusion (known as sakoku) must be considered, as it not only barred nearly all international trade, it also forbade the Japanese to leave Japan. The Tokugawa period of isolation lasted some 200 years (1630s-1850s). This context forms an important basis of an old-world, some would say feudal, culture, and mindset stemming from such isolation.

It is likewise important to remember that Shiki's grandfather, Ōhara Kanzan, was a Confucian scholar, Samurai, and Shiki's first teacher, who was a significant, influential aspect of Shiki's psychological foundation. Kanzan was outspoken and unwavering against the onset of western civilization:

Kanzan was adamantly opposed to the new world of the Meiji period. He refused, for example, to study any Western languages. In the last line of a Chinese poem which he had Shiki copy out, he expressed his disgust for languages which were written horizontally instead of, like Japanese, vertically: "Never in your life read that writing which sidles sideways like a crab across the page."  
(Beichman, Cheng & Tsu Company, 2002, p. 3)

By 1892, Shiki having failed an exam, dropped out of college. "You must have heard I received the honor of failing," he wrote. (Beichman, p. 16) Following this, he intensified his studies of haiku — reading every hokku he could find. He blamed his failure at the University on that fact that he could not think of anything but haiku — he was obsessed, or as he wrote, "Bewitched by the goddess of haiku." (ibid)

Once out of college, he zealously pursued his haiku ideals and concepts. He remained outspoken and disputed anything blocking his goal of saving hokku from its impending death — soon to be renamed and reformed by Shiki as haiku. Shiki was at odds, in regards to haiku, with the new era of Western education and influence. He was not embracing it; he was defending haiku against it:

In response to (Western) criticisms that the seventeen-syllable form was simply too brief for serious artistic expression, particularly in comparison with the longer forms being introduced from the West, Shiki argued that its very brevity was its strength and that as a result it was capable of types of expression impossible in other forms. (Masaoka Shiki, Burton Watson, trans, Columbia UP, 1997, p. 5)

In Shiki's view, "The new world of the Meiji period contained no subjects fit for poetry, no subjects that is, that could fulfill the ideal of 'noble grace'" (Beichman, p. 33). Shiki was so attached to Japanese tradition that he wrote, "New subjects and new words are not permitted in waka (haiku)" (Beichman, p. 34). He went on to describe various paraphernalia (e.g. steam engines) relating to the Western world, stating clearly that they were unacceptable for use in Japanese haiku or waka.

When further challenged, Shiki took what Herbert Spencer, a western philosopher, had written, "The shortest sentence is the best," and turned it around to use as a defense of his new style — haiku. Shiki's response was to say, basically, that haiku is therefore the best poetic form:

Which (one) has more to offer -- the scant 17 syllables of Basho's [hokku] on the old pond, with their layers of meaning or Hitomaro's tanka (a longer poem) on the long, trailing tail of the mountain bird, which expresses but one meaning? (Beichman, p. 14)

Thus, Shiki defended haiku against the low opinion, commonly held at the time, of its poetics.

The education system was being shaken and the Japanese world, as everyone had known it, was transforming. By the late 1800s to control of the education system, reaching deeply into Japanese lives and lifestyles with its adaptation of Western education ideals. Shiki found himself in the midst of these changes, and he was on the defense. Shiki notes:

And when one turns to the innumerable social matters to which this enlightened age has given rise, or the so-called conveniences of modern civilization, many are the epitome of the mediocre, the quintessence of the vulgar, and totally useless to a writer. (Beichman, p. 34)

This (Shiki) is not an individual that has fully accepted the influence of western civilization and the newly developed education system at hand, as some critics have recently opined. This was sarcasm from a man "on the ropes," fighting back. While he embraced the name of "sketch from life (shasei)," he did not adopt the perspectives Western poetics have utilized in its longer forms.

Natsume Sōseki, a friend of Shiki, said, in line with Shiki's thoughts, "To do so (letting go of Japanese tradition), will soon weaken the vital spirit we have inherited from our ancestors and leave us cripples" (Watson, p. 2). Sōseki and others believed that the Westernization of Japan equated to its demise as a culture and as a country.

Years earlier, Shiki, at age 15, was banned from public speaking by the principal of his middle school because he was a radical (Beichman, p. 8). His spirit as a fighter was evident; and the strength of his intellect was clear — as clear as his

eventual efforts to save haiku from Western influence, of which he feared would bring about its demise.

When first confronted with new poetry forms/genres, Shiki tried them out, but soon focused once again on haiku and his pursuit of rebirthing it (Watson, p. 1). "In 1891 he set about in the history of the form by reading all the collections of earlier [hokku] he could lay his hands on. . . . This provided [Shiki's] critical writings on haiku . . ." (Watson, p. 2). Shiki pondered Western ideals of poetry, but consistently returned to his passions of the study of hokku and the development of haiku, his reinvention.

While the Meiji period began in 1868 (the beginning of modern Japan), by the 1870s, the new educational system only included some 40%-50% of available students. The system did not stabilize until approximately 1890, and it wasn't until the turn of the century that the government obtained a real lock-down on the entire country, eventually involving some 90% of potential students.

Shiki continuously defended Japanese culture and poetry. He remained focused on this theme throughout his life, and was steadfast as an intense researcher of hokku, eventually renaming the hokku style and applying the following qualities/poetics as the beginner's haiku guide: 1) Write about what you observe and/or remember (the things around you); 2) follow 5/7/5; 3) include a kigo (season word) — though one notes that Shiki himself often did not include kigo in his haiku; and, 4) utilize a kire-ji (a cutting word, dividing the haiku). In 1899, Shiki wrote:

Take your materials from what is around you — if you see a dandelion, write about it; if it's misty, write about the mist. The materials for poetry are all about you in profusion. (Watson, p. 7)

Kaneko Tohta, (b. 1919), an acclaimed contemporary Japanese teacher, scholar, and critic, writes:

By using cutting words you can create 'blendings' of two images. That means the reader is able to 'image' the haiku. I think that this uniquely rich haiku of visualizable image cannot possibly be outdone by the prosaic. (The Future of Haiku: An Interview with Kaneko Tohta, Gilbert et al, p. 41)

Kaneko continues, in support of Shiki's argument: "I think that haiku can be a serious form of literature, via these two elements ['blending' and 'imaging']" (ibid).

Moreover, Kaneko outlines:

[The] element of subjectivity was an extremely important aspect of haiku

composition for Shiki, but he was also concerned that his haiku would become unintelligible if he composed too loosely. And this is the reason for Shiki's applying the term 'sketch' to this process. . . .

Hekigoto (Shiki disciple), made a great effort to spread haiku, literally walking all over the country advocating that people compose what they directly thought and felt in haiku. (Kaneko Tohta, *Ikimmonofûei*, Gilbert et al, p. 27)

Robert Wilson writes:

[Shiki's] reformation was a monumental work, to which a great debt is owed. He'd single-handedly taken on Japan's literary establishment, the State-run Shinto Sect, and the Imperial Court, dethroned Basho as a god, and did so while dying of tuberculosis." (Robert D. Wilson, *What Is and Isn't: A Butterfly Wearing Tennis Shoes*, *Simply Haiku*, Winter 2013).

Wilson continues:

Shiki rightfully believed that hokku [haiku], to be effective and considered as a legitimate literary art form, must succumb to academic scrutiny, be thought of seriously, and removed from the hands of a manipulative government (ibid).

"To be effective and considered as a legitimate literary art form," (ibid), was Shiki's lifetime goal; it succinctly clarifies that Shiki was in battle, a warrior of samurai blood, defending haiku and what he envisioned it to become.

Eventually, Shiki's concepts of haiku went global: "It is ironic that the haiku, which many people in Shiki's day thought would wither away under the impact of new literary forms from abroad, has now become one of Japan's most successful cultural exports" (Watson, p. 4). By 1902, Shiki was gone — disease took his life at 35. He remained a fighter until his death, often defying Western influences and judgments, as he persisted on his journey to prove that a Japanese brief poem of 17 syllables was indeed a worthy literary genre.

Masaoka Shiki haiku:

ki o tsumite the tree cut,  
yo no akeyasuki dawn breaks early  
komado kana at my little window

matsu sugi ya pine and cypress  
kareno no naka no in a withered field,  
Fudōdō a shrine to Fudō

furuniwa ya old garden—she empties  
tsuki ni tanpo no a hot-water bottle  
yu o kobosu under the moon

keitō no cockscombs...  
jûshigohon mo must be 14,  
arinubeshi or 15

ikutabi mo again and again  
yuki no fukasa o I ask how high  
tazunekeri the snow is

yuki furu yo snow's falling!  
shōji no ana o I see it through a hole  
mite areba in the shutter...

yomei how much longer  
ikubaku ka aru is my life?  
yo mijikashi a brief night. . .

## Endnotes

Japanese source-text:

Masaoka Shiki (1941). *Shiki kushu* (Tokyo: Iwanami).

Romaji and English source-text:

Janine Beichman (1986). *Masaoka Shiki* (Tokyo: Kodansha)

## References

Kaneko Tohta, *Selected Haiku With Essays and Commentary, Part I: 1937-1960*, Gilbert et al., Red Moon Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-936848-11-9. Available: [www.redmoonpress.com](http://www.redmoonpress.com).

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