

An Analysis of Haiku in 12-dimensional Space^{*}

Charles Trumbull

Poets have busied themselves over a definition of haiku since the beginnings of the English-language haiku movement. We still seem far from any sort of consensus about what haiku is and how the genre relates to Japanese and Western poetry. The disarray of the ongoing debate was made clear in 2000, when Robert Spiess challenged 11 leading haiku thinkers to submit definitions of haiku in 25 words or fewer and published them together in *Modern Haiku* (31:3 [fall 2000, 74–75]). The respondents were Bruce Ross, George Swede, Dhugal Lindsay, William J. Higginson, David Cobb, ai li, Cor van den Heuvel (whose definition was reconstructed by the *Modern Haiku* editors), A.C. Missias, Randy M. Brooks, Lee Gurga, and Robert Spiess. The range of expert definitions was fascinating—as well as illustrative and troubling. For the major definitional noun in their classifications—that is, “haiku is [what?]”—8 of the 11 called it a *poem*, while one each characterized haiku as a *genre* (Brooks), or a *moment* (Ross), or a *record* (Missias). There was even less agreement on other aspects of a definition of haiku. Only 4 respondents mentioned any sort of line or metric requirement, and all of them qualified their language with a “usually” or some other single-word modifier: Ross says 3 lines; ai li suggested 1–4 lines; Higginson called for 3 lines and 12–17 syllables; and Lindsay prescribed 7–17 syllables.

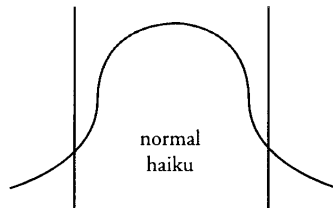
A.C. Missias was as fascinated as I was with the spread of these definitions and published her analysis in an article entitled “Struggling for Definition” in *Frogpond* (24:3 [2001], 53–63). She applied her skills as a research neurobiologist to the problem. Missias analyzed each of the experts’ definitions (to which she added a 12th, the HSA definition) in terms of the mention or absence in each definition of what might be considered core features of haiku, 13 in number and including: brevity, form, nature, reality, etc. Then she presented them in a full-page table for easy analysis. Missias found a high degree of overlap on some items and came up with a rough-and-ready summation that haiku is “poetry marked by brevity, reality, nature/seasonality, a moment’s duration, and insight or intuition.” (56) She observed, moreover, that despite the variations, all of the experts seem to be shooting at the same general target.

Perhaps what we should be looking for is less something which has *all* of these core features, than something which has *many* of them—enough somehow to be recognized through a “family relationship.” Think of any family you know: there are often children who look very different from each other, and yet each of whom bears a recognizable similarity to one or both of the parents. By the same token, we can recognize as “haiku” many poems which seem different from one another, but which share at root some linkage to the traditions and “resemblances” of the genre — its core characteristics.

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Missias continues,

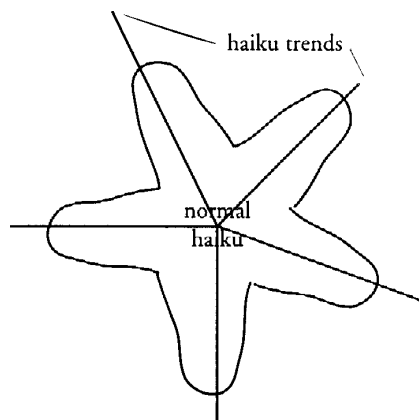
[F]or any particular feature or characteristic, we can imagine an axis, and if we were to graph the frequency with which “legitimate” haiku exhibit any degree of that feature, it would have some distribution not unlike a bell curve.



Highly Technical Figure I

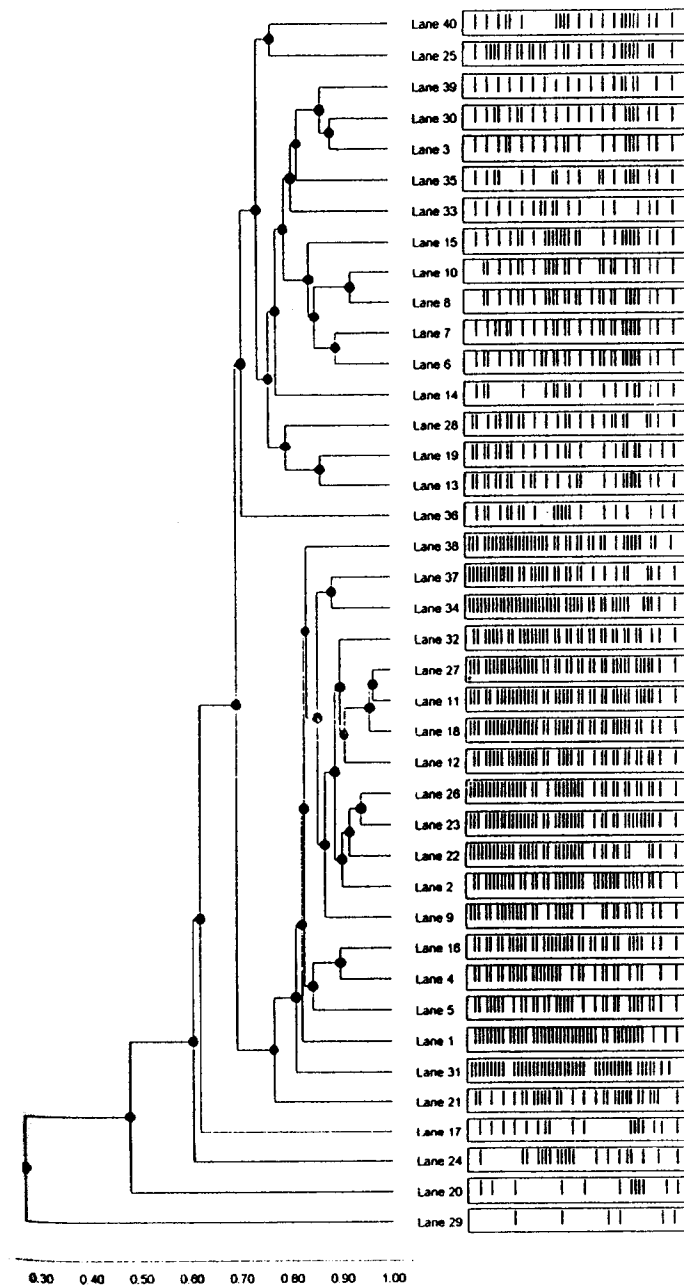
This bell curve (see *Highly Technical Figure I*) can be seen as a distribution of haiku along an axis of, say, objective <—> subjective, and most haiku will tend to group in the center. There are some poems that are far more subjective than the haiku norm, and others that are far more objective, but the bulk, the haiku most typical of the genre, can be expected to array themselves toward the middle of the curve.

Missias thus comes up with a very sensible *normative* approach to haiku. “Ask not,” she seems to ask, “whether a poem is or is not a haiku; ask rather how typical it is of the haiku genre.” She goes on in her *Frogpond* article to suggest that when several of the two-dimensional bell-curve representations of core aspects of haiku are combined, the result is a three-dimensional graph resembling a starfish, with a large lump of “normal” haiku in the center, and a number of outstretched arms that represent different haiku traditions (let’s not call them “abnormal”!) that have developed over the years. (See *Highly Technical Figure II*.)



Highly Technical Figure II

Missias’s normative definition is confirmed in a way by the much more technical classification scheme devised by the Scotsman DJ Platt, preliminary results of which were published in 2000 in



Highly Technical Figure III

Blithe Spirit (“Fingerprinting Haiku: Help, Hindrance or Heresy,” 10:2 [June 2000]). Platt, who is—as Missias was at the time—employed a research biologist, was inspired to analyze haiku using the DNA “fingerprinting” technology that he employs in his genetics laboratory. Platt’s procedure is too detailed to discuss at length here, but, briefly, he asked five of his British haiku colleagues to score 40 haiku on a four-point scale, 0–1–2–3, on 17 qualitative criteria. These included “superficial—depth,” “imitation—originality,” and “mere jokiness—deep playfulness.” He also included counts of lines and syllables for each haiku. The results were (apparently) combined and averaged, quantified,

and turned into punch-card-like “fingerprints.” These fingerprints were then analyzed by computer for similarities and dissimilarities and arrayed in a dendrogram, or tree diagram, that groups together haiku found to be similar on multiple criteria. (See *Highly Technical Figure III*). This procedure determined, for example, that of the 40 haiku analyzed, these haiku, by Buson and Shiki, respectively, were most closely related,

not a single stone
to throw at the dog:
the winter moon

the summer river
there is a bridge
but the horse goes through the water

while this haiku of Santōka’s

the beauty of the sunset
grieves not for old age

was found to be least like any of the others in the study.

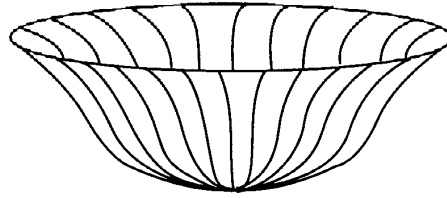
Thus, Missias points our attention to the haiku “norm,” while acknowledging the existence and even importance of non-normative haiku, while Platt concentrates on developing and proving subjective criteria for the definition of “normal.”

A taxonomy not only of haiku but of all poetry is the subject of recent work by Bob Grumman, who has given place in the order of things to what most of us would consider non-normative, quite marginal haiku. In his essay in *Modern Haiku* (“A Divergency of Haiku, ToxanAtomyzd,” 34:2 [summer 2002], 20–26), Grumman takes an extraordinarily broad view that encompasses Surrealistic, visual, sound, and mathematical poetry as well as some new categories that Grumman gleefully names and taxonomizes in his highly idiosyncratic style. The importance of this work for our study is less in enlightening us about haiku norms and more in defining some of the far reaches—and perhaps the empty spaces between—the tentacles of Missias’s starfish model.

Other more or less scientific investigations working toward a definition of haiku include the work of the Belgian computer scientist and haiku poet Serge Tomé, “Les différences culturelles dans l’écriture du haïku: une nouvelle méthode d’analyse du haïku,” (*Mushimegane* N° 15, <http://www.big.or.jp/~loupe/mu15/tome.shtml>), which takes a statistical approach to determining cultural and social underpinnings of haiku in several countries and across time in Japan (one finding, for example, is “A significant presence of “I” (32%) in modern Japan as against 9% for the European groups (8% for Croatia and 9% for France), 12% for the U.S., and 22% for Yugoslavia.”; and an unpublished paper, *Little Catastrophes: The Topological Structure of Humor and Haiku*, in which Michael Dylan Welch seeks to utilize catastrophe theory to apply to haiku a mathematical model of humor developed by John Allen Paulos.

Let’s return to Missias’s graphical representation but switch metaphors. Her starfish, you will recall, is a three-dimensional superimposition of a number of bell curves. Let’s flip her starfish over, flat side up, and think of the resulting structure as a pond—a frog pond maybe—full not of water but of every haiku that has been written in English or translated into English. The “shoreline” of our frog pond will follow the contours of the underlying landscape (perhaps even Haruo Shirane’s “cultural landscape”?) and, like the star shape, will present an irregular surface. Every new haiku that

is written and added, as it were, to the frog pond will minutely alter the dimensions and shape of the pond. Over time and with the addition of many new haiku, the outlines of the pond could alter significantly in unpredictable directions.



Highly Technical Figure IV

How can we measure such a frog pond? Is it possible to locate any single haiku—or haiku poet, or journal—with any authority within this body of haiku? The pond can be graphed as a number of inverted bell curves. (See *Highly Technical Figure IV*.) Further, each of these curves represents a continuum of values along a single coordinate, for example, from objective to subjective, from formal to informal, etc. We can define the endpoints of each axis by a pair of polar statements, propositions that represent the likely extremes of one aspect of haiku, for example: “Haiku is objective” and “Haiku is subjective.”

There is a problem, however, as we try to remain in this three-dimensional model: a haiku could be extremely subjective, for example, but written in a formal way (normally speaking)—that is, on one scale the haiku would be positioned at the edge of the pond while on another it would be found in the thick part of the bell curve. In our three-dimensional scheme such a haiku would not seem to be located in any one spot. To resolve this problem we need to think not in three dimensions, like the frog pond in *Figure IV*, but in more dimensions, one for each continuum or pair of propositions. More than three dimensions cannot be represented satisfactorily on a two-dimensional sheet of paper or computer terminal, so you’ll have to imagine with me what *Highly Technical Figure V* might look like.



Highly Technical Figure V

As a start, to replace Missias’s starfish and a three-dimensional frog pond, I propose 12 such dimensions. Each of these dimensions has a pair of opposing propositions that define the endpoints

of an axis. Then, for each dimension we can imagine, say, a 10-point numerical scale, 0 to 9, that represents stages of the continuum between the extremes.

My 12 dimensions replay familiar arguments about haiku, although the extremity of the statements may be a bit shocking. The 12 pairs of statements, plus a scale for each, are included on the back side of your handout and labeled Examination Sheet. For the remainder of this class period, we will go one by one through these arguments, always trying to present both sides with equal conviction. There is quite a bit of overlap, and some dimensions seem derived from—or are at least closely related to—others. I have tried to emphasize these relationships by listing the more conservative, Japanese-oriented positions first, as the “A” statements.

Dimension 1: Haiku definition

Proposition 1a. Haiku is a way

Many people believe, at least in part, that haiku is a discipline, a way of thinking, or a way of living. People who affirm this usually link haiku writing to Zen practice, the Tao, or perhaps some form of Oriental meditation, as does Vincent Tripi, whose haiku are often close to Zen koans

Rain
where is the salmon
going?

Vincent Tripi,
Somewhere among the Clouds

For American haiku poets, the ideas of Henry David Thoreau and the teachings of religious thinker Thomas Merton have been influential.

lighting the path
to Walden Pond —
my bedside lamp

Ebba Story,
Modern Haiku 23:1 (winter 1993)

American poet Charles Henri Ford, who died just recently, has showed that haiku could be surrealist. Haiku for him was a way; he wrote a haiku every day though rarely, as far as I know, published any. (“Charles Henri Ford: Catalyst Among Poets”)

Nothing matters but
Nonsense and even nonsense
Doesn't matter long

Charles Henri Ford
Modern American Poetry Web site

The French haiku poet and scholar Georges Friedenkraft (“Style and Spirit in French Haiku”) suggests that French haiku poets could replace Zen with a core European philosophy such as the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre.

[T]he seasonal word is not always present in French haiku and the “weight of being” is no longer related to the enlightenment of Japanese Buddhism, but rather, to a non-religious existentialist stance ... as exemplified by Jean Paul Sartre and his followers—and which, in poetry, would be the description of a strong emotional moment, as such of which Daniel Richard writes when hearing a false note:

*Une fausse note!
on tressaille quand
le tonnerre éclate*

A false note!
trembling when
the thunder then breaks out

(Richard’s poem is from his *Le jardin japonais*, [Paris: La pensée universelle, 1990, 50].)

The late Cid Corman, an American living in Japan, was an extremely prolific poet and, though he stoutly maintained that he did not follow the rules of haiku (or any other rules), the haiku spirit suffuses his work and his life

Shadow

gong

shadow.

Cid Corman
Corman, ed. *The Gist of Origin, 1951–1971:
An Anthology* (1975).

The idea that underlies all these haiku “ways,” both Oriental and Occidental, is that the poetry arises organically from our existence, that our artistic expression is of a piece with the path we have chosen. We could point to a number of poets who more or less completely live a haiku way of life. Tripi would be one, and probably Clark Strand. Maybe Jack Kerouac, too, for his use of haiku: the image of him and his friends tossing off haiku as they climb the Sierras or dash frenetically back and forth across the country is appealing to the haiku mystique: the feeling that haiku are arising spontaneously from the very *living* of the poets’ lives. Lidia Rozmus comes close to living a *zenga* life (Zen paintings).

Proposition 1b. Haiku is poetry

At the other end of this dimension are those folks who would call all this a bunch of mystical bunk. Believing that haiku is *a way* is simply ... well ... a way out there. How many of us really spend our lives living the Tao and writing haiku?

In the *Modern Haiku* survey that we cited above, 8 of 11 experts identified haiku as a poem. Well, *dub!* What else could it be? A koan? An epigram? For many people, haiku is simply a pastime, a challenge to capture a thought or emotion in a crystalline form, or a word game. But just as with any form of poetry, haiku can be serious as an *object* of human activity as well as its *subject*. That is to say, people can be very involved in poetry and can even write haiku exclusively without them taking over the Universe!

Dimension 2: Haiku's place

Proposition 2a. Haiku is exclusively Japanese

This is perhaps the most fundamental issue among our 12 dimensions. The A-team would argue that the haiku evolved in Japan, developed there for four hundred years or so, and is still a major branch of Japanese culture. Because it is so intertwined in Japanese culture, the haiku cannot successfully be grafted onto other cultures. Most Japanese probably believe this deep down, much as Americans are suspicious of Japanese playing jazz. Even today, when referring to non-Japanese verse, the word “haiku” is likely to be written in *katakana*, the script used for foreign words, to distinguish the efforts of *gaijin* from home-grown Japanese haiku. We also see this perspective in the “segregationist” policy of Japanese institutions such as Haiku International, which maintains separate but equal clubs for Japanese and foreigners.

Mainstream American poets of the reputation of Robert Bly, Sam Hamill, and Robert Hass believe that haiku is better left to the Japanese. At various times all of these poets have indicated their dismissal of English-language haiku. Remember too that at the beginning even pioneers of Western haiku such as R.H. Blyth and Harold G. Henderson seriously debated whether haiku could be written in languages other than Japanese.

Not many working American haiku poets could risk an extreme position of this sort, yet would acknowledge that we cannot lose sight of the haiku's Japanese roots. The tug of Japanese culture can be detected in the “stink of Zen” that infuses many English-language haiku, the continued pull of the traditional *yuki teikei* (17 syllables, season word, cutting) format for haiku. Poets who have spent some years in Japan can often show a tendency toward the A-side; look at these two haiku by Margaret Chula and Carmen Sterba, respectively:

color of her kimono
flows into the teabowl
one mind

Frogpond 17:1 (spring 1994)

woodland path
the scent of plum blossoms
draws us forward

Sterba, *Sunlit Jar* (2002)

A number of prominent translators and poets, including Hiroaki Sato, R.C. Matsuo-Allard, and Marlene Mountain have advocated one-line haiku at least partially in order to make English-language haiku visually closer to the Japanese model.

Proposition 2b. Haiku is appropriate for any language or culture

For most Western writers of haiku this perspective is trivial. The very act of writing a haiku in English is a vote for the position that haiku can be written outside Japan. So no American haiku poet would place him- or herself clear at the A end of this axis, and the real question becomes how

far to the right the poet dares to go. We cannot ignore either extreme of this dimension, which might be expressed metaphorically by the question, which is the more important part of a tree, its roots or its branches? Some haiku and poets are considered too “Japanesey” (to use Michael Dylan Welch’s word). Ultimately, the question may not be quite so trivial, however, because the struggle for influence over the world haiku movement currently taking shape is mapped along this dimension.

Dimension 3: Haiku ideology/aesthetics/poetics

Proposition 3a. Haiku employs Japanese aesthetics and poetics

Obviously haiku aesthetics are of fundamental concern for Japanese haiku, but some would consider the inclusion of Oriental aesthetics as a characteristic that distinguishes Western-language haiku from other poetic forms. The sensibility of a haiku include, among others, (to use William J. Higginson’s words in *The Haiku Handbook*) *aware*—“the poetic expression of impermanence; the evocation of the transient,” *sabi*—the feeling of an individual’s aloneness in the cosmos, or as Higginson says, “the spirit of loneliness, is the yearning for connection” *wabi*—a recognition of the profundity of the humble and everyday; the spirit of poverty, *yūgen*—“Beauty of mystery and depth, often combined with other effects such as elegance, refinement, ambiguity, darkness, calm, ephemerality, and sadness.” [Ueda, 429] These sensibilities are interrelated in aspects such as mystery and numinousness and, most of all, loneliness and sadness. This is why autumn is the favored season for Japanese haiku poets. They are very far removed from common Western esthetics and to some degree are exclusive of them.

Proposition 3b. Haiku employs Western aesthetics and poetics

Indeed, Western poets might well retort, “all this is fine for the Japanese, but a poem must make use of the poetic devices available to the culture in which it is written. For us English speakers this means metaphor, simile, empathy and personification, etc.—even rhyme. All this “slobby-wasabi” stuff flies right past any American who reads it. Anyone who thinks otherwise is simply playing at being Japanese.

So what are Western aesthetics and poetics anyhow? This is slippery turf, but I would suggest that, insofar as the term is applied to poetry and haiku, Western aesthetics would include an analytical approach, intellectualization and abstraction of sense-derived experiences, and morality and other involvement of the human psyche. Western poetics would include use of our common poetic devices, especially metaphor and simile, and a broad humor.

Arguably, Issa is the haiku master to whom Americans can most readily relate. Issa’s deep concern for small, abject creatures, explained in the *haikai* context as a Buddhist idea of the undifferentiated nature of all things, is read in the West quite differently, rather as human empathy, the same sort of attraction we feel we get from the eyes of the subjects in a *manga* drawing or the heavy-duty emotions of a Tchaikovsky symphony.

Examples of Western aesthetics abound among poets who come to haiku from other forms of verse and who concentrate on the formal aspects of haiku; take, for example, these verses by the poets Victor Hernández Cruz or Hayden Carruth:

MOVEMENT OF MOLASSES

Men argue honor
While twenty blocks away their
Women train horsies

Cruz, from “Haikukoos,” in *By Lingual Wholes* (1982)

Fathers die, but sons
catch the grave chill, looking in
at lost forgiveness.

Carruth, from *The Clay Hill Anthology*,
Collected Shorter Poems (1992)

Similarly, shouldn't we haiku poets be able to avail ourselves of the use of Western poetics?
Compare Shakespeare's sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day” to Jeff Winke's haiku

long summer day
limes, tequila, beers
our tongues thicken

Raw NerVZ 4 (1999)

Or compare the clipped diction of a traditional haiku with the repetitive, chant-like cadence of ancient Semitic languages, as heard in this fragment from Psalm 96:

Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad,
let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
let the land and all it bears rejoice,
all the trees of the wood shout for joy

at the presence of the Lord for he comes,
he comes to rule the earth.
With justice he will rule the world,
he will judge the peoples with his truth.

Did you hear all those personifications?! Or again, the passions of the troubadours' song (with a first line that is a fore-echo of T.S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and a refrain that reminds us of the courtly *waka* of ancient Japan):

Come let us kiss, dear lover, you and I,
Within the meads where pretty song-birds fly;
We will do all despite the jealous eye:
Ah God, ah God, the dawn! It comes how soon.

verse from “Alba”

Dimension 4: Haiku’s “spectiveness”

Proposition 4a. Haiku looks inward to engage the Universe

Haiku expresses a Zen sensitivity—looking inward to engage the Universe. As we have seen, extremists would affirm that haiku and Zen are inseparable; both Blyth and Canadian haiku pioneer Eric Amann said things very close to this.

A mouse stirs
in the kitchen cupboard;
winter solitude

Amann, *Cicada Voices*

The very best haiku explore our inner mindscapes; lacking such introspection, a haiku is banal and flat.

Proposition 4b. Haiku looks outward to engage the Universe

Dimension 4 has much to do with ego or how the poet relates to the world around him or her. Like much Western poetry, haiku engages the Universe in external terms: philosophical, emotional, social, and political. We cannot limit subject matter to a small segment of what is really important in our lives. Interpersonal relationships should be included, as Alexis Rotella does in her famous “After an Affair” sequence:

Wild touch-me-nots:
you never
touch me

Rotella, *After an Affair*

Poets should write about social ills: AIDS, the environment, man’s inhumanity to man (and women), war ...

uncomfortable —
body armor shifting
on the car seat

Kylan Jones-Huffman, unpublished;
posted on the Cricket Internet mailing list

This, the final haiku of a young soldier, Kylan Jones-Huffman, was written in September 2003, just hours before he was shot dead in a traffic jam in Iraq. The poet's world is everywhere.

Most Japanese—and many European—haiku poets believe that Americans overemphasize Zen. Susumu Takiguchi, the founder of the World Haiku Club, promised John Ezard of *The Guardian* newspaper on 12 June 2000, shortly before his World Haiku Festival 2000, “the festival would challenge an American influenced ‘minimalist’ trend towards single-line haikus [sic] which groped for ‘a moment of enlightenment’ in the style of Zen Buddhism.”

Dimension 5: Haiku point of view

Proposition 5a. A haiku takes an objective view

Objectivity in haiku means that the world is regarded as an object to be viewed by the poet with detachment. The classically oriented haiku poet will be egoless, saying “the world exists without me, although I am a part of it and it is a part of me.” These poets often write of themselves in the third person. This can signify humility, self-effacingness, or simply modesty. These poets will often poke gentle fun at themselves.

a creaking of bones
and rumble of bowels
my zazen

Robert Spiess, *Cottage of Wild Plum*

Proposition 5b. A haiku takes a subjective view

The subjective view means that the author is involved in the subject of the haiku, the author's opinions are manifest, and his/her feelings are evident in the text.

The objective-subjective dichotomy is not strictly arrayed along an Oriental-Occidental axis. It may surprise many American haiku poets to learn that a kind of subjectivity in haiku was recognized by the great haiku reformer Masaoka Shiki. Shiki taught that, when a poet has mastered, first, the discipline of objectivity called *shasei*, or writing from nature, and, second, subjective realism, wherein the poet attempts to select the essential elements from a scene and express them in language, he or she may aspire to the highest level, “to begin to examine and express the poet's own interior reality. Shiki called this *makoto* or ‘truthfulness.’ Haiku master Yatsuka Ishihara referred to this as the ‘landscape of the heart’” (Gurga, 135). Moreover, modern master Ogiwara Seisensui, who is credited with founding the free-form haiku movement in Japan, boldly advocated subjectivity in haiku.

Winter evening —
shadow and I,
writing about me.

Seisensui, in Stryk, *Cage of Fireflies*

Ishihara carried it one step further, by advocating that in haiku truth be written as if it were fiction—that is to say, the writer should deliberately abandon strict objectivity for the sake of ... well, poetry. This “new subjectivity” seems to be a hallmark of contemporary Japanese haiku.

From needles of frost
issue glittering voices
of a steely blue

Yatsuka Ishihara, in *Hidden Pond*

crisp and clear blue sky
alighting on a tree branch
a goldfish!

Dhugal Lindsay, *Fuyoh 3* (autumn) 1995

Raymond Roseliep wrote many haiku about himself using his *haigō*, or haiku name, Sobi-shi. What are we to make of these haiku?

clothesline
Sobi-Shi's pajamas
kicking the sun

Roseliep, *Rabbit in the Moon*

Is Roseliep being objective or subjective here? Lets' score him a 4 on the scale for this axis.

Dimension 6: Haiku form

Proposition 6a. There exists a standard haiku form

This is a well-known debate—and probably the most often contested axiom of haiku: there is a single, established form appropriate to haiku in English. Haiku is written in a 5–7–5 syllabic pattern, uses a *kigo*, or seasonal reference, and employs the technique of “cutting” (*kire*) to divide the verse into two parts for internal contrast or comparison. As we saw earlier in the definitions of the 11 experts, additional rules for English-language haiku have accumulated like flies to ... an Issa poem. These include formulations for line count, subject matter, punctuation, use of verbs and participles, and so forth.

Dhugal Lindsay, the Australian haiku poet resident in Japan, has asserted that fully nine-tenths of Japanese still write in classical style (Lindsay, “Kigo”). In America, despite the fact that 5–7–5 haiku may seem a bit antique to some people nowadays, being associated with the old guard such as J.W. Hackett, O Mabson Southard, Nicholas Virgilio, and Helen Stiles Chenoweth, it is true that 5–7–5 is still the haiku *norm*—as Missias would define it. Some teachers—Clark Strand, Susumu Takiguchi, and David Coomler come to mind (as do the hordes of grade-school teachers)—expressly advocate classical-form haiku. The arguments in favor of this approach are that the most important or distinguishing aspect of a haiku is its form, that form is the element that gathers the body of work known as *haikai*, that following a strict structure aids clear, concise writing, that season is by definition essential to haiku, that haiku gains its effectiveness and liveliness from the juxtaposition of two concrete images, and so forth.

Proposition 6b. There is no single haiku form

At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that form is *not* the most salient aspect of a haiku and that haiku may be written in any number of forms, does not require a season focus, and/or may consist of a single image. Advocates of this “free-form” approach to haiku are quick to point out that many haiku by the Japanese masters are not strictly 5–7–5 and that avant-garde 20th century Japanese poets entirely abandoned counting syllables and routinely including seasonal references. Santôka, who is much admired in the West for his insouciance and free spirit, wrote haiku pretty much as he pleased. Americans are cultural iconoclasts: make a rule and they will try to bend or break it. Recent Japanese *saijiki* contain a section for nonseasonal haiku, they might argue, so season must not be an absolute requirement. We could posit that haiku is just a nature poem, so any nature reference will suffice. In contemporary American haiku the situation is even more chaotic: people are writing in anything from one to four lines— or even more if you count vertical haiku. One-word poems, like Cor van den Heuvel’s “tundra,” may be called haiku, as may any compact concrete poem. Seasonality and internal comparison, for these B-type personalities, are optional. Pushing ever farther from orthodoxy is the only way to realize one’s personal poetic potential.

Dimension 7: Haiku language

Proposition 7a. Haiku language must be as spare as possible

Haiku must be written in language that is brief and straightforward—telegraphic and even laconic. “The wordless poem” is the ideal—the language (as well as punctuation and other physical aspects of the haiku) should be as close to invisible as possible. Language is an imperfect medium for transmitting a moment of perception, emotion, or insight; therefore careful attention must be paid to making it as efficient a conductor as possible. Regarding brevity in haiku, harken to Robert Spiess’s words that “the more words the more distance, the more silence the more proximity.” (Spiess, *New and Selected Speculations*, No. 296.) Our objectives in using language might be characterized as “simplicity,” “economy,” and “succinctness.”

Proposition 7b. Haiku must use language to the fullest

The other side would argue that language is what poetry is all about. Language must be used to the fullest extent possible for the adequate articulation of the nuances of a haiku moment. Arguing for simplicity of language, or even brevity per se, is the equivalent of calling for the use of baby-language in haiku, and could even lead to the cardinal sin of Tontoism (omitting articles, etc., for the sake of brevity), as in this haiku by Carolyn M. Johnson from the first volume of *HSA Frogpond* (1:4 [1978], 22):

Through cloudy duskness
peer emerald green cat’s eyes
at sound of footstep

Rather, haiku language should stress finding exactly the right expression, precision, as well as felicity of sound. Poets on the B-side of Dimension 7 might write haiku for the sheer joy of the language itself, as does the Irishman Paul Muldoon, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003:

The Rose and Thistle.
Where the hummingbird drops in
to wet his whistle.

Paul Muldoon, from the sequence
“News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm”

George Orwell showed us that owning the language is owning the minds. Few could be more exuberant in their confidence in the American language than Raymond Roseliep. Listen to part of his long letter to the editors of the journal *Bonsai* in 1976:

The most obvious way we can begin to make haiku more our property is to exploit our fabulous native tongue. English can be as musical as only a poet knowing the keyboard can make it, or as cacophonous as he may wish to make it too. Within our miraculous sound system we have cadences, rhythms, measures, movements, stops, pauses, rimes (!). We possess a gigantic vocabulary—and oh what we can do with words when we arrange them! Since phrasing is vital to haiku, our supple American idiom stands ready for achieving any effect desired, and waits only the hand of the poet to manage it.

For the very reason that a haiku is so short, each word in the poem must do extra duty. We should not use “creature” if it is a bird; we shouldn’t write “bird” if “woodpecker” is needed; we might prefer to be even more specific:

Logging road —
the pileated woodpecker
flings its cry ahead

Carol A. Purington
Frogpond 19:2 (September 1996)

By the same token, meaningfulness in haiku language embraces aspects such as resonance, allusiveness, surprise, and even humor.

Dimension 8: Subject

Proposition 8a. Haiku is about nature

By definition, haiku is a nature poem. This is axiomatic, though in certain respects human nature is vital to haiku as well. Ipso facto, if a poem is not about nature it cannot be a haiku. The Japanese have a separate genre, *senryu*, that deals with human beings and their foibles, and there are plenty of other forms one can use to write about other things.

Proposition 8b. Haiku is about human nature

Would you exclude humans from your nature? In Western practice, the distinction between haiku on the one side and *senryu* and other forms on the other is especially difficult to draw.

Is this verse of Yu Chang's, for example, a haiku or a senryu?

New York apartment
the roses from Sydney
drying upside down

Upstate Dim Sum 1:1 (spring 2001)

Like it or not, all poetry is about humans. Even the most seemingly egoless and objective verse is still ultimately about humans. Bashô's "old pond" haiku involved an observer, so we are merely getting Bashô's take and opinions on the scene. And that's not even getting into the philosophical depths, which are even more a human thing.

Dimension 9: Milieu

Proposition 9a. Each haiku contributes to the larger cultural context

This dimension is close to Dimensions 1 and 2 as well as 10. The "A-sayers" argue that haiku is an integral part of the culture in which it is written. Normally this would be Japanese culture, where haiku partakes of Japanese poetics, forms, assumptions, etc., along with other forms of verse and literature. Haiku also is inseparable from Zen. Reciprocally, the activities of haiku poets enrich the cultural milieu, just as other arts do.

Proposition 9b. Each haiku is a unique and self-sufficient creation

Certainly, cultural context plays a role in haiku—it is probably not possible to imagine a completely *acultural* haiku—as it does in any other art, but we cannot judge haiku on how well it holds up when superimposed on a cultural context. As an independent work of art, a haiku must stand or fall on its own merits. To be successful it must pass muster in a variety of cultures—i.e., the best haiku must be "transcultural." Each haiku, if you will, is unique in the eyes of God!

Dimension 10: Objective

Proposition 10a. Each haiku refines the tradition

Each haiku becomes one with all other haiku that have been written, just as once a drop of water falls into a frog pond it becomes part of the pond and alters it. The "priming" for our haiku pump, moreover, is that same body of water. Nothing we can write is totally new, we merely select ideas that have been used before and rework them, trying to add new meaning or resonance. Bashô did this by alluding to or even quoting works in the great imperial poetry collections and the Chinese classics. We Westerners must do this as well if we want to write real haiku. A haiku poet's greatest accomplishment is to find a new angle on a traditional theme.

Proposition 10b. Each haiku charts new territory

Once again, what the 10a crowd is proposing is not a very Western way of doing things. Why would I want to plod back and forth across the same ground? With millions of people writing haiku these days, surely topics like "cherry blossoms" and "autumn moon" have long since been done to death by haiku poets. Soon all possible haiku variations will have been used up; what will we do then?! No, any good haiku that is written now brings something completely new to the art,

whether it be in the area of haiku form, content, aesthetics, grammar, or whatever. Freshness, invention, surprise—that’s the ticket! I might even go so far as to say that the more radical the verse the better the haiku.

PORNOGRAPHY

Unemployed love

Alan Dent, *still* 1:1 (1997)

Dimension 11: Time

Proposition 11a. A haiku captures a real moment in the present

Haiku seeks to blur the distinction between the moment and the representation of the moment. Haiku written on the scene are best (recall Kerouac in his mountaintop fire tower). A premium is placed on spontaneity and naturalness, and there is a minimization of intellectualizing, analyzing, and synthesizing. A haiku tries to capture the aha! moment; it is best when seemingly unedited and raw. The logical outcome of this thread of thinking is that a haiku is written in the present tense and favors the use of participles (such as “crickets singing”) and verbs in the progressive voice (such as “the sun is setting”)...

Proposition 11b. A haiku is not time-bound

“Rules, rules, rules! You want to define haiku right out of existence, like the Cheshire cats in *Alice in Wonderland*. Again, the poet must have the freedom to write about what is important in life, past, present, or future; real or imagined.” Is the past tense or even the future tense any less real than the present?

A certain monk
Went back home
Without waiting for the moon.

Bonshō, in Blyth, *History of Haiku* I:175

from now on
the deer and the monkeys
will become your disciples

Kyoshi, in HSA, *A Haiku Path*

As for the question of duration, how long is a “moment” anyway? A nanosecond? A heartbeat? A geological era? It is fatuous to think that the gap between the so-called haiku moment and writing can be eliminated. A digital photograph may come close to reproducing a moment in real time, but a haiku certainly cannot. One always edits writing, so we might as well admit it and get the most of it.

Another question: why does a haiku have to be tied to a living, concrete moment? What about abstract haiku? Surreal haiku? Intuitive haiku? Dream haiku, as Joe Kirschner has studied in his book *Inside Out: Haiku and Dreams*? Many haiku are derived from memories of experiences; Dee Evetts has run workshops in New York City on haiku-writing from memories. Some folks even write haiku

from “second-hand memories” such as novels or TV programs, sometimes called “Nova haiku” after the TV program and consisting of vivid verses about, perhaps, the slaughter of a baby antelope by a Serengeti lion, as viewed from a reclining rocker in Levittown. Besides, “According to Robert Lowell, ‘A poem is an event, not the record of an event.’ Of course this is an ideal, rarely achieved in any poetic form.” (Gurga, 13)

Dimension 12: Haiku audience

Proposition 12a. Haiku is written to be shared

Haiku is really a collective endeavor. This is a very Japanese notion. We have seen that haiku should be intimately related to the great body of work that has been written by the masters over the centuries. As I wrote earlier (“Seasonality”),

It may not be too fanciful to visualize Japanese haiku poets reaching up to the Great Sphere of the Seasons where all foregoing haiku reside, reverently selecting and detaching a small piece with which to prime their own verse, then returning the kigo to its place in the heavens together with the new verse, thereby using the kigo, addressing their peers in a common language, fitting their verse into 1,000-plus years of Japanese culture, and enriching the whole enterprise—all at the same time.

Haiku is written for all other haiku poets, past and present. We are all part of a great cosmic haiku machine.

This sort of interdependence and group ethic prevails in Japanese haiku groups, a few American haiku organization, and on the Internet. The haiku evolved from linked, shared forms; the renga began as a drinking game, and to a great extent this ethos still informs the genre. Japanese haiku groups seem to function on group dynamics, with a high level of individual responsibility to the group and to the master. Likewise, Internet discussion groups such as Raku Teapot and HaikuTalk often seem to act as support groups for beginning haiku poets.

Proposition 12b. Haiku is written for self-expression

The American, iconoclastic response is likely to be, “I ain’t beholden to nobody for my poems.” Each haiku is created *in vitro* or springs from my head complete and whole. I am the sole judge of its worth. “Well, ultimately I write my poems for myself.”—This can sound like the last line of defense for a poet whose work has been criticized as too difficult or inaccessible! Argument 12b includes writing haiku for one other person, and, by extension the individual and idiosyncratic *reception* of haiku—that is, the notion that this haiku is written *for me*. Remember too that haiku can also be used for therapy. In the end, then, no man is an island, it takes a village, and all that. ...

This completes our whirlwind tour of haiku in 12-dimensional space. If this paradigm catches on, as I think it will, at future haiku conferences we can all expect to be wearing tags on which a series of 12 numbers, representing the 12 dimensions, is written prominently. In this way everybody will know everybody else’s “haiku ID” and will know immediately each haiku cadet’s place in the

12-dimensional haiku space. Clearly, it will be a waste of time for an “A” type to talk to a “B” types and everything will be much more orderly.

For starters, my haiku ID is 2723-4542-4353.

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