ISSN 2051-526X (print) | ISSN 2399-9705 (online) DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

Haiku Westward: Poetics of English Translation in the Early 20th Century

Nengying Chen
School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University

Author Note
I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nengying Chen, School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.
Email : chenny25@mail2.sysu.edu.cn

Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of haiku translation poetics in the English-speaking world. Focusing on translations from the first half of the 20th century, it compares Asatatro Miyamori and Harold G. Henderson's early adaptations, which emphasize formal and rhythmic alignment, with R. H. Blyth's culturally grounded, Zen-oriented approach in *HAIKU*. Rather than a sharp break, these translations show continuity in negotiating Japanese aesthetics and English poetic expression. While emerging in the formative stage of haiku's transmission to the West, these works laid a crucial foundation for later haiku scholarship, highlighting the genre's capacity for cultural adaptation and renewal.
Keywords: history of haiku in English, poetics in haiku translation, R. H. Blyth

1. Introduction

Haiku originated from the Japanese *renga* (連歌) and is the shortest fixed-form poetry in the world. It is characterized by a 5-7-5 syllabic structure, a seasonal word (*kigo*), and a cutting word (*kireji*) that provides structural or emotional contrast. Haiku embodies distinct elements of Japanese cultural and aesthetic sensibility. It has been more than a century since haiku witnessed its global dissemination as a traditional Japanese poetry. Haiku is undoubtedly the peak of Japanese culture, a gift that Japan sends to the world. The global dissemination of Japanese haiku was ignited in the Western Europe, then its popularity spread through the United States, and Eastern Europe. The dissemination of haiku in different countries unfolds with the

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DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

same carrier, the translation of haiku. Were it not for the efforts of translators, the initial development of western haiku would not have been achieved.

One of the most important reasons of haiku's popularity in the west is its continuous acceptance of its fate as transformed by other forms of poetry. Therefore, modern haiku gradually presents the characteristics of western poetry genres. Tatyana (1997, p. 44) points out that "the content of haiku, the focus of Japanese haiku is on the objective description of things, while as for haiku in English, it shows more concretization of emotions."

The original haiku translation in English was completed by British diplomats employed by the Japanese government after the Meiji restoration. In 1864, the French philosopher Paul-Louis Couchoud traveled to Japan, becoming the first to translate haiku into French (Bernard, 2001). Later, as Zen became popular in the West, D.T. Suzuki and his disciple R. H. Blyth brought new ideas to the interpretation of haiku.

With the global development of haiku, its study has made significant progress and sparked widespread discussion across the world. Before exploring the poetics of haiku translation, it is essential to first understand the history of haiku's dissemination in the West.

2. Haiku's Passage into English Poetry

Around 1893, the term haiku emerged after a haiku innovation movement led by Masaoka Shiki（正岡子規）(Baird, 2014). Haiku, known as "hokku" or "haikai" in early 20th-century Europe, differs little in essence from its earlier forms. Sato (1992, p. 22) notes that while English speakers adopted "hokku," the French preferred "haikai," being particularly attuned to rhythm and reportedly less receptive to the structure of "hokku."

The global dissemination of haiku was initiated by some British scholars and other westerners who were proficient in Japanese. In 1877, scholar Aston, who was employed by the Japanese government, published the *Classical Poetry of the Japanese and A Handbook of Colloquial Japanese* (1888), which embodies some haiku translations. However, he did not

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regard haiku as a kind of poetry, but an epigram. In 1902, Chamberlain published his "Bashô and the Japanese Poetical Epigram," an essay concerning Basho's haiku. Similar to Aston, Chamberlain also considered haiku as a poetical epigram. In 1890, Lafcadio Hearn, in his *Exotics and Retrospectives*, affirmed for the first time that haiku shares some characteristics of poetry.

In 1913, Ezra Pound composed his famous poem "In A Station of the Metro", which was considered as the first haiku in English. In 1932, Asataro Miyamori published *An Anthology of Haiku Ancient and Modern*, including more than 800 haiku translations. Two years later, Harold G. Henderson proposed his pioneering work *The Bamboo Broom*. Both of them attempted to process the translation of haiku as English poetry and endeavored to reflect the characteristics of English poetry in haiku translation.

As the Second World War kept raging on, the Japanese government also attached great importance to the export of Japanese culture in its external expansion. In 1938, Suzuki, a pioneer in introducing Zen to the West, published *Zen Buddhism and its influence on Japanese Culture*, in which he discussed the relationship between Zen and haiku as well as pointed out that the essence of Zen is to grasp the intuition, thus achieving the goal of enlightenment. Moreover, intuitive expression requires the assistance of images. In this regard, haiku is an excellent vehicle to convey this intuitive insight.

Between 1949 and 1952, Blyth published his influential four-volume *HAIKU*, combining translation with extensive commentary and marking a milestone in haiku studies. Prior to this, he had already written several works on Zen and haiku, but *HAIKU* was the first to interpret a large number of haiku through a Zen lens. In contrast, Japanese American scholar Kenneth Yasuda's *The Japanese Haiku* (1957) focused primarily on haiku form, with minimal reference to Zen.

Since the 1950s, American poets influenced by Blyth's Zen-infused interpretation of

ISSN 2051-526X (print) | ISSN 2399-9705 (online) DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

haiku have launched a vibrant English-language haiku movement. Many of them viewed haiku as the outward expression of Zen's inner spirit. Under Blyth's influence, James Hackett published numerous haiku exploring Zen themes. The Beat Generation also contributed significantly: Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) features lively, experimental haiku; Gary Snyder's *The Back Country* (1967), known for its "hitch haiku," reflects his deep engagement with nature and Zen, earning him the Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Grand Prize. Allen Ginsberg's *Mostly Sitting Haiku* (1978) is another representative work of the period. Zen ideas also shaped the poetry of Richard Wright, whose posthumously published *Haiku: This Other World* (1998) contains over 4,000 haiku blending Zen insight with literary precision (Dulin, 2019), significantly enriching the English haiku tradition.

In 1964, the American haiku magazine *American Haiku* was founded, and in 1968 Henderson founded the American haiku society. English haiku has witnessed leapfrog development in more than a century. Haiku in English also presented its characteristics as a popular culture through its growth in the West. It was in the same year that JAL held an English haiku contest in commemoration of the Tokyo Olympic. A total of 41,000 haiku were collected. Among all the competing works, Hackett won the contest as he composed:

A bitter morning

Sparrows sitting together

Without any necks. (Kacian, Rowland, & Burns, 2013, p.20)

This haiku depicts sparrows huddled against the cold. The image captures a brief yet evocative moment, aligning closely with the traditional haiku spirit of observing nature with immediacy and emotional clarity. Its popularity illustrates haiku's ability to adapt across languages and cultures.

This cultural flexibility fostered the growth of haiku communities worldwide. Founded in 1968, the Haiku Society of America and its journal *Frogpond* played a key role in promoting

ISSN 2051-526X (print) | ISSN 2399-9705 (online) DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

haiku. Since then, haiku associations have emerged worldwide: the Haiku Society of Canada in 1977, the British Haiku Society in 1990, and the World Haiku Association in 2000. Haiku's global development has continued steadily, marked by growing maturity, popularity, and international reach.

Haiku has developed in English and American poetry for over a century, evolving from a misunderstood epigram into a recognized poetic form. The rise of haiku societies and publications worldwide reflects its growing vitality across languages. More and more poets now embrace haiku, and the emergence of English translation of haiku has played a key role in its global flourishing.

3. The Haiku translation Turn: Miyamori, Henderson, and Blyth

Earlier in the West, haiku was often translated as an epigram, typically accompanied by explanations of Japanese grammar and culture. However, in the 1930s, Miyamori and Henderson tried to treat haiku as an independent poetic form. Their extensive translations marked a significant shift in haiku interpretation and laid the foundation for modern haiku translation. Their influence was particularly evident in the work of Blyth.

During his tenure as Assistant Professor of English at Keijo University in Seoul, Blyth developed a deep interest in Zen and Eastern thought through discussions with students and colleagues. In the preface to *Japanese Life and Character in Senryu* (1960), he describes himself as an inherent animist and vegetarian who discovered haiku by chance and encountered Zen through Suzuki's writings. His fascination with Zen led to the publication of *Zen and English Literature* (1942), where he acknowledged the influence of Suzuki's Zen philosophy, Miyamori's *An Anthology of Haiku* (1932), and Henderson's *The Bamboo Broom* (1934)[1] on his engagement with Japanese haiku. He later reaffirmed this in the preface to *HAIKU* (1949). Those who are interested in the subject should read Miyamori's An Anthology of Haiku,

[1] Henderson's 1958 work *An Introduction to Haiku* significantly expands upon his earlier book *The Bamboo Broom* (1934), adding substantial new content, including hundreds of additional haiku. This paper cites the 1958 edition.

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Ancient and Modern, and better still, Henderson's The Bamboo Broom, An Introduction to Japanese Haiku. (Blyth, 1949, p.13)

Blyth held Miyamori's and Henderson's works in high regard, both of which significantly shaped his haiku translation. Miyamori, a Keio University scholar, produced numerous English translations of Japanese literature. Henderson, a Japanologist, co-drafted Emperor Showa's (昭和天皇) *Humanity Declaration* with Blyth in 1946 and began his haiku studies with *The Bamboo Broom*. Unlike earlier translators, both focused on haiku as poetry rather than as a cultural or linguistic expression. Miyamori distinguished haiku from epigram in his preface, while Henderson emphasized that mislabeling haiku as epigram distorts its interpretation (Matsumoto, 2016, p. 49).

Miyamori's *An Anthology of Haiku*, an 841-page collection of texts, translations, annotations, and commentary, is widely regarded as a valuable resource for haiku studies. Known for his word-for-word translation style, Miyamori often renders seasonal words rather roughly, focusing mainly on traditional natural imagery such as cherry blossoms, hazy moons, snow, and cicadas, while excluding seasonal words related to human affairs. Blyth later responded to this limitation by offering a more expansive and culturally nuanced interpretation of seasonal words.

Miyamori tended to select haiku that lent themselves to smoother English translations, a strategy also evident in Blyth's *HAIKU*. His annotations focus primarily on Basho and his disciples, with noticeably fewer notes on later poets like Issa and Shiki (May, 2012). The following example illustrates Miyamori's translation style.

Translation:

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None goes along this way

But I, this autumn eve. (Miyamori, 1932, p. 59)

Original haiku: この道や 行く人なしに 秋のくれ

Romaji：(Kono michi ya / Iku hito nashini / Aki no kure)

In terms of form, Miyamori arranges haiku alphabetically by Japanese pronunciation and renders them into two-line English versions, using slashes to mark pauses. He adopts the rhythm of English poetry, favoring poetic fluency over strict fidelity. The translation above shows a clear iambic tendency—especially in the second line. While the first line begins somewhat abruptly with consecutive stressed syllables, the rhythm soon falls into a regular iambic pattern. This rhythmic choice enhances the poem's musicality and suggests Miyamori's intention to draw on English poetic traditions to heighten its lyrical quality.

Henderson's translations are more reader-oriented and content-rich. He organizes haiku by poet, includes brief biographies, and selects representative works while downplaying seasonal elements for accessibility. For example, in the haiku *"Bush Warbler and Plum"*, he translates:

Title： Bush warbler and Plum

Translation:

The bush warbler-oh,

his perchings on the plum tree

stared long ago!

Literal translation: Bush warbler: plum in perching as-for long-past from

Romaji：（Uguisu ya ume ni tomaru wa mukashi kara）(Henderson, 1958, p. 77)

Like the translation above, Henderson added a title to each haiku, and all of them

ISSN 2051-526X (print) | ISSN 2399-9705 (online) DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

were translated in a three-line form. The end-rhyme was used in the first and the third line, aiming to align the translation with the form of English poetry as much as possible. Besides the translations, Henderson added an additional word-for-word translation for each haiku, in this way the readers can better understand the meaning of haiku. Replicating the original haiku's 5-7 syllabic rhythm in English poses significant challenges. As Sugahara (1996, p. 27) points out, literal translations often read like prose and lose their poetic quality. Aware of this, both Miyamori and Henderson approached haiku as English poetry, emphasizing rhythm and stylistic fluency.

As previously discussed, Blyth's translations inherited certain strategies from Miyamori and Henderson, yet developed into a distinct poetics of their own. His approach significantly influenced American Beat poets after the 1950s. Given this impact, his four-volume *HAIKU* series and his translation poetics deserve focused attention.

Blyth's passion for poetry, cultivated during his years at the University of London, naturally led him to haiku, a form grounded in nature and seasonal imagery. His encounter with Zen, which seems almost fated in retrospect, deepened this connection. As a vegetarian with deep reverence for life, Blyth was especially sensitive to haiku's attunement to the natural world. His Zen studies, which began in Korea, shaped his worldview; in Japan, he sought to unite Zen and literature—an ambition that ultimately defined his unique method of haiku translation.

HAIKU is a four-volume masterpiece of 1,300 pages. The first volume focuses on the cultural and philosophical foundations of haiku, including its spiritual origins, its relationship with Zen and poetry, representative works by Basho, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, as well as Blyth's translation strategies and his treatment of haiku's formal constraints. The remaining three

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volumes are organized thematically by season: spring (volume II), summer and autumn (volume III), and autumn and winter (volume IV). The publication of *HAIKU* not only introduced the unique aesthetic of Japanese poetry to English-speaking audiences, but also played a significant role in promoting global interest in Zen Buddhism.

The four volumes of *HAIKU* contain 2,645 poems, primarily by Basho, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, with particular emphasis on Basho. However, the transmission of haiku to the West is not limited to these canonical figures. As Sato (1991, p. 105) points out, some haiku virtually unknown in Japan gained recognition only after being translated into English and circulated in the West. One such example included by Blyth is a representative haiku by Hashin (芭臣):

天も地もなしに雪の降りしきり

There is neither heaven nor earth,

Only snow

Falling incessantly… (Blyth, 1952, p. 237)

Although haiku is deeply rooted in Japanese language and culture—often making translation difficult—there are exceptions. Hashin's poem, for instance, resonates strongly with the English poetry, particularly in its evocative minimalism and universal imagery.

Another example from Yayu (也有):

元日や雪を踏む人憎からず

New Year's day;

I do not hate

Those who trample on the snow. (Blyth, 1950, p. 16)

This haiku is not widely known in Japan, yet Blyth selected it for inclusion, demonstrating his preference for poems that, while obscure domestically, resonate effectively in English. His choices were often guided not by canonical status in Japan, but by the poem's potential for cross-cultural transmission—its emotional clarity, imagery, and accessibility to

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Western readers.

Distinct from earlier translations, Blyth introduced two major innovations. First, he classified haiku by season—echoing the structure of *Saijiki* (seasonal reference books)—and further divided each season into seven thematic categories: "The Season," "Sky and Elements," "Fields and Mountains," "Gods and Buddhas," "Human Affairs," "Birds and Beasts," and "Trees and Flowers." Unlike his predecessors Henderson and Miyamori, who organized translations by poet, Blyth's seasonal and thematic arrangement reflects a deeper engagement with Japanese cultural and poetic traditions.

Among Blyth's seasonal classification of haiku, the category "Gods and Buddhas" is particularly noteworthy as his own innovation. This unique classification underscores Blyth's deep commitment to interpreting haiku through the lens of Zen Buddhism. As he states in the preface to *HAIKU* volume I, "Haiku is the last flower of all Eastern culture... haiku are to be understood from the Zen point of view" (Blyth, 1949, p. 5). Through this approach, Blyth frames haiku as a medium for spiritual insight rather than mere aesthetic expression.

Blyth's selection criteria are not guided by a poem's popularity in Japan, but by its potential to reflect Zen aesthetics and insight. He chose lesser-known haiku that allowed for Zen-inflected readings, even when such interpretations may not have aligned with the poet's original intent. One such example appears in volume III:

夕立ちや知恵さまざまのかぶりもの

A summer shower, —

According to their wisdom,

The various head-coverings. (Blyth, 1950, p. 67)

Although composed by the relatively obscure poet Otsuyu (乙由), this haiku was selected by Blyth. The original poem briefly depicts a sudden summer shower and people's varied, instinctive reactions—using fans, bowls, handkerchiefs, sleeves, straw mats, even a

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sieve. While Blyth does not explicitly link this haiku to Zen in his commentary, his earlier statement in *HAIKU* volume 1—that haiku should be interpreted through a Zen lens—provides a clear interpretive framework. Viewed from this perspective, his description of these diverse reactions, presented without judgment or hierarchy, becomes a vivid illustration of the Zen idea of equality among all beings. Every object and action, however ordinary or absurd, holds equal value in the moment. This interpretive approach suggests that Blyth saw haiku not merely as literary artifacts, but as vessels for Zen insight and cross-cultural reflection.

In addition to demonstrating his poetics through haiku translation, Blyth also articulates a clear translation strategy. Blyth argues that a good haiku should capture "the awareness of the moment" and convey a fresh emotional impact. In the preface to *A History of Haiku* (1963), he advocates for a highly literal translation approach, making his versions more accessible to readers familiar with Japanese. For example, in his translation of Basho's most iconic haiku:

古池や蛙飛び込み水の音

(huru ike ya kawazu tobikomi mizu no oto)

The old pond,

A frog jumps in, -

The sound of water. (Blyth, 1949, p. 329)

Blyth translates *furu ike* (古池) as "the old pond"—an accurate but not entirely precise rendering. While semantically equivalent, "old pond" in English may suggest any water-filled space, including artificial ones, whereas *furu ike* in Japanese typically refers to a moss-covered, hand-dug pool. Sato (1991, p. 24) thus proposes "the quiet pond" as a more fitting translation, capturing the rustic simplicity of traditional Japanese settings. The adjective "quiet" also heightens the contrast with the sudden "sound of water" as the frog jumps in, helping readers visualize the moment. This example illustrates Blyth's consistent preference for literal translation, grounded in his belief that "the more literal, the better."

ISSN 2051-526X (print) | ISSN 2399-9705 (online) DOI: 10.64699/24UAOJ9071

HAIKU represents a landmark in the transmission of Japanese haiku to the West, distinguished by its scale, interpretive depth, cultural insight. Through thematic seasonal classification and Zen-inflected readings, Blyth not only preserved the classical tradition but also introduced lesser-known works that bridged Eastern and Western aesthetics. His emphasis on literal translation and spiritual resonance positioned haiku as more than poetry—as a medium of cultural and philosophical exchange—thereby laying the groundwork for haiku's global reception and long-lasting vitality.

4. Summary

Haiku, originating from Japanese renga, is the world's shortest fixed-form poetry, characterized by a 5-7-5 syllable structure, seasonal references, and cutting words. As a symbol of Japanese aesthetics, haiku has achieved global reach over the past century, largely through translation. Its adaptability to Western poetic forms, coupled with the influence of Zen, has transformed it into a cross-cultural literary phenomenon.

The English reception of haiku began in the late 19th century, initially regarded as epigrams by early translators such as Aston and Chamberlain. Miyamori and Henderson played a key role in reimagining haiku as poetry in English, developing foundational translation strategies that emphasized rhythm, imagery, and accessibility.

Building on their efforts, Blyth introduced a Zen-infused poetics that redefined haiku for Western audiences. His four-volume *HAIKU* canonized both classical and lesser-known haiku, combining literal translation with interpretive commentary. By framing haiku as both spiritual and philosophical expression, Blyth created a literary bridge across cultures and helped secure haiku's enduring presence in global poetry. Blyth's influence extended beyond scholarly circles and had a profound impact on postwar poetics of haiku in America. Through his work, haiku became not only a poetic form but also a mode of spiritual expression within a broader cultural context.

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