"This Haiku Is Not a Haiku": Rethinking Form and Textuality in International Haiku

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Abstract

This article aims to use a recently published poetry collection as a reference point to explore some of the major debates that have engulfed the poetry world since the internationalisation of Japanese haiku as a poetry form, which revolves around the following questions: what constitutes a proper haiku? What form in non-Japanese languages would best represent its original structures? Would a free form better express its original spirit? Crucially, can a verse that is not intended to be a haiku be labelled as such only for its visual or semantic implications?
Keywords: multilingual, Japanese aesthetics, haiku, graphic pause

The multilingual collection of short poems *Respiro: Metropolitan Haiku* (Chiatante, 2025) explores the concept of haiku as a poetic object that can be represented in multiple forms and languages, borrowing from several traditions, and even questioning the necessity of haiku as a label itself. By identifying and focusing on the most prominent features of the verses in *Respiro: Metropolitan Haiku*, this article contributes to the debate about non-Japanese haiku while placing *Respiro* into context and providing an interpretation of the volume from its semiotic textuality.

1. Non-Japanese Haiku as a Poetic Object

Too late

For cherry blossoms.

Memories in bloom

This verse is quoted from *Respiro: Metropolitan Haiku* (Chiatante, 2025, p. 122), a collection of short poems that explores the relationship between humanity and the city intended as part of nature itself. The poem is short, semantically minimal and imagistic, three-lined, with a reference to the cherry blossoms, and could be easily considered a haiku. This form of short poetry, Japanese in origin, has been "arguably the most popular formal poetry written worldwide today" (Caldwell, 2019). Its popularity, however, initially grown from an interest to Japanese culture and aesthetics, has prompted in foreign poets and imitators a tendency to orthodoxy: so that sets of compositional rules have been established in several languages to write "good haiku" (Friedenberg, n.d.), classical haiku, or haiku allegedly more faithful to the original Japanese form.

Yet the poem quoted above, composed in Japan as a tribute to Japanese aesthetics, does not follow exactly those compositional rules as dictated by tradition in English. No syllable' count has been observed; part of its content refers to memories, but these are abstract and vague if compared to the standard attention that haiku poets traditionally pay to the here and now, the detail, and the detachment from the self. These 'rules of good composition', from the simple classroom-based rule of writing a haiku in three lines respectively of 5, 7 and 5 syllables as creative writing or even therapeutic exercise (Nguyen et al., 2019), to the necessity of capturing the original 'spirit of haiku' (Caldwell, 2019) by annihilating the identity of the poet into the poetic object, to the inclusion of a traditional seasonal word, have all specific reasons for being. There are many more rules, which vary from language to language and are all attempts to write verses as faithfully as possible to the classical Japanese haiku. However, the volume *Respiro* collects 108 poems that purposedly experiment with some of these ideas, exploring the concept of haiku as a poetic object rather than a form to be followed. Each composition is intended as a semiotic text, even visually; some of them are accompanied by specifically selected

illustrations to interplay with the complexity of association, and all of them have been written as contemporary poems.

2. Formal Stances on Non-Japanese Haiku

Nevertheless, the collection is subtitled *Metropolitan Haiku*, thus deliberately labeling its poems as haiku. The question is, then, whether a composition written in a non-Japanese language and missing the major traditional elements of its classical composition can be considered or labeled a haiku. The first English verse to be called a "*hokku*-like sentence" (Pound, 1916b) is the famous "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound (1916a), *hokku* being the name given to the haiku form before Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) designated it as such. Besides its reference to a highly vague seasonal word (the petals on a wet bough), the poem showcases no formal connection to Japanese haiku. A seasonal word (*kigo*), a cutting word (*kireji*) that divides the haiku into two distinct images, and a syllables' count that structures the haiku into three lines of *short-long-short* form are usually considered basic characteristics of a haiku in any language. But, besides the first two features, which still refer to some extant elements of classical Japanese haiku, the last one has been widely discussed and recently considered as a misunderstanding of Japanese composition (Gilbert et al., 2000).

Putting aside linear division, the rhythm of non-Japanese haiku still constitutes one of the main points of academic debate. While some (Gilbert et al., 2000) argue that the original haiku should be understood semantically as a juxtaposition of two rhythmical and semantic units divided by a cutting word (making it easier to understand haiku that are not necessarily arranged on three lines), others (Ishikawa et al., 2015) emphasize on its rhythmic division into 17 phonics units called *mora* that do not equal 17 English syllables. A *mora* is either a structural or a temporal unit in Japanese language, it has a grammatical or expressive function that rarely equals one of another language, and it carries a different semantic weight than an English syllable (Ishikawa et al., 2015). If we ignore that Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) himself, the father

of classical Japanese haiku (or *hokku* as they were called at the time), already tended to vary the verses' conventional length in order to achieve specific rhythmic effects, the Western convention of writing haiku in three lines of approximately 5-7-5 syllables has been refuted since the beginning of its international popularity (Gilbert et al., 2000). To simply quote Henderson, one of the most respected authors on English haiku composition: "an invariable 5-7-5 syllable count is not an adequate answer" (1967). In terms of international linguistics and Japanese haiku moras transposition into any other language's syllables, then we may quote R. H. Blyth, the main disseminator of Japanese haiku in the Western world: "The fact is that 'syllable' does not have the same meaning for the Japanese, the Romans and Greeks, and the English" (1950). The question can be observed also in the translation or composition of haiku in Chinese, where the 17 moras of a classical haiku are usually rendered into three lines of 13 Chinese characters. The main difference between the two languages is the extensive role played by particles and auxiliary verbs in Japanese. "The grammatical structure of Chinese is relatively simple, and words only indicate their actual meaning, without inflections or affixes, and grammatical functions are mainly expressed by the word order of the arrangement" (Zhu, 2019), each syllabic character carrying a heavier semantic density than a Japanese mora. An interesting phenomenon in Chinese literature has been, then, the creation of a hybrid form of poetry in 5-7-5 characters called "*Kan-hai*", derived from the exchange with haiku poets but that "has a rhyming form that is very Chinese". It shall be noted that a characteristic of classical Japanese haiku is a non-rhyming structure, while Chinese language and classical Chinese poetry feature a specific musicality and signification derived from the tonal identity of the language.

The correspondence of Japanese haiku to non-Japanese haiku form based on its rhythm and syllabic structure has therefore been discarded by a great number of poets and academics (Gilbert et al., 2000). Yet, the American author Richard Wright (1908-1960) has composed

exemplary haiku that represented the essence of the form for generations of readers, prominently in 5-7-5 syllabic count. He managed indeed to give the firm syllabic structure the fluidity of free speech and communicational simplicity. The Beat Generation poet Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), on the other hand, has focused on the spiritual and communicational identity of his "American Haiku", consistently composed in a three lined, free form, and theoretically re-named "American Pops" (Kerouac, 2003), emphasizing the vernacular and serendipitous nature of the composition. While haiku at the time had already been translated from the Japanese and studied academically, Kerouac was the author that popularized the form in the Western world with his novel *Dharma Bums* (Kerouac, 1958), where the characters explored haiku as a meditational art form, connecting themselves to Zen philosophy and their own North American surroundings. Since the first informative publication of Blythe (1949) and Suzuki (1959) on Zen and haiku, post-World War II American counterculture had started to explore East Asian Zen Buddhism as a philosophy of spiritual cultivation, connecting oriental aesthetics, social and urban settings, and nature into what was being discovered as a new and liberating way of expression, the English haiku. Blythe and Suzuki had highlighted the connection between haiku and Zen Buddhism in several works, although Matsuo Basho himself, as Zen practitioner, had argued that haiku would represent "an obstacle in the path of religion – a sinful attachment, as Buddhism calls it" (Ueda, 1967). The attitude, in the style of the most celebrated Zen masters of all centuries towards the arts, can be open to multiple interpretations, but it still does not obliterate the meditational value that generations of Western poets have found in haiku poetry as a form of self-cultivation, a bridge between East and West, representing artistic liberation and connection with nature. Quoting Kerouac: "Above all, a haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi pastorella" (Kerouac, 2003). From *Respiro* (Chiatante, 2025, p 89):

3. Formal Examples in Respiro

Scent of lilies

Under the full moon,

The mind is focused (Chiatante, 2025, pp. 89)

Three lines, a seasonal or natural object, a Zen spiritual approach represent what Kerouac intended as the derivative elements of haiku. He rendered *kireji*, though, in a way that inverted the orthodox length of the three lines most used in non-Japanese haiku (short-long-short). The *Kireji* in Japanese is usually a particle with little semantic weight: it provides a pause, crucial for juxtaposing two images into one atmosphere and setting up a specific rhythm. Furthermore, it has been theorized (Hasegawa, 2008) as essential in classical haiku for generating evocative silence, providing a special psychological moment, the "*kokoro*". On the place where the *kireji* is more often inserted in the rhythmic pattern of a haiku and on what morphologic equivalent could non-Japanese haiku substitute the Japanese particles used for cutting the composition, are but two of the topics of debate to date. In Kerouac's case, his haiku often feature an empty space in the second line. These kinds of "American Pops", resulting in a structure of long-short-long, almost outrageously inverting all discussions on structure and equivalence, provide a graphic effect of emptiness that directly transfers to the reading mind:

Following each other

my cats stop

when it thunders. (Kerouac, 2003)

The same technique has been explored in *Respiro*:

Heavy on their million

Screens

Like these lilies in the dew (Chiatante, 2025, p. 31)

Or:

Like constellations

Tiny flowers

In the autumnal grass (Chiatante, 2025, pp. 103)

Both compositions are syntactically a full sentence without interruption, and no punctuation or dash has been used to indicate a pause. The goal is to keep a certain syntactic fluidity, while the graphic pause on the second line would slow the reading down, in an attempt to set the psychological silence sought in Japanese through the kireji. A dash or punctuation, however, have been employed in compositions of a more imagistic nature, where the focus had been put on a minimal juxtaposition of objects or "the things" (Flint, 1913). From *Respiro*:

The magpie's

Croak — speeds up

The falling leaf (Chiatante, 2025, p. 102)

Or:

Framing

The corners of my vision,

Morning glories (Chiatante, 2025, p. 36)

The punctuation has been chosen where a compromise between imagistic directness and syntactic fluidity was preferable. Referring back again to the origins of post-war American haiku and its connection with Zen philosophy (with which the imagistic aesthetic ideals also seemed to be compatible), concentration and instantaneous expression of the relationship between the poets and life have been key principles of composition. This is perhaps why Kerouac and other Beat Generation writers have found in haiku one of their preferred poetic forms. The Beat poets aimed at genuinely expressing the essence of American society as it was, with its full array of cultural identities at every social level, from the lowlifes, the aesthetes to the academics etc., and with them the linguistic identities comprised in the American

vernacular. Their preference for a style that follows the rhythm of the spoken word, and their inclusion of urban and social elements as objects, can then be safely inferred.

4. Semantic and Linguistic Examples in Respiro

"A real haiku's gotta be as simple as porridge and yet make you see the real thing" (Kerouac, 1958).

"The real thing" of a "haiku moment" (Zheng, 2021) may then be a serendipitous juxtaposition of seasonal rain and a psychological pang of uncertainty, then, from *Respiro*:

Careful steps

Under the heavy rain

What tomorrow? (Chiatante, 2025, p. 18)

The subject perceived as object derives directly from the Zen Buddhism interconnectedness of perceiver and perceived. The aim of Zen meditation is indeed to achieve *non-dualism*, a *samādhic* oneness (Nagatomo, 2024), *Samadhi* being a Sanskrit word meaning "the highest state of mental concentration" (Duignan, n.d.). Kerouac defined haiku as "short 3-line poems … delineating 'little Samadhis' if possible, usually of a Buddhist connotation, aiming towards enlightment" (Kerouac, 1997).

Andrea Zanzotto's "concentrated meditations" on Italian landscape are the defining feature of his short poems (Secco, Barron, 2012), where the poet's emotions, linguistic experiments, indefinite reflections coagulate into natural objects, exchanging fleeting impressions and sensorial fragments through a minimal form that he called 'pseudo-haiku' (Secco et al., 2012). The verses have been collected in *Haiku, for a Season* (2012), first written in English and translated back into Italian, Zanzotto's mother tongue. The poet had been going through a depression so radical that it had almost left him bereft of words; it was only through these compositions in a foreign language that he re-discovered his linguistic abilities. Poetry for him was indeed a therapeutic form of "self-analysis" (Breda, 2012). He found in the

minimal impressions he could decipher from the translations of Japanese haiku, therefore devoid of their original structural features, the freshness of a pre-cultural, primeval "biorhythm" understandable and common to all humanity. The choice of using English as the first language of composition of his own verses, a language he was not proficient in, and of re-interpreting them in Italian on a second stage, made the linguistic process an artistic object in itself. This approach inspired the bilingual composition of *Floating Petals* (Chiatante, 2022) and the multilingual approach of *Respiro: Metropolitan Haiku*. In *Respiro*, the poems have not been merely re-interpreted back into Italian: they have been composed directly with a multilingual approach, resulting, for instance, in English verses featuring words from other languages. The aesthetic insight, as spontaneous as it occurs in multilingual settings, has been noted freely as it was - a "little samadhi", a "haiku moment":

Flowers in the noodles shop

Respiro

Cities of the South (Chiatante, 2025, p. 23)

For this verse, which provided the title to the collection with the Italian word "Respiro", the translation does not render the foreign word effect, being all in Italian. The next verse, though, has been translated with a focus on this specific effect, with the Italian component in the English being rendered into Latin in the translation:

Noonshine

Silenzio e solitudine —

The city naps

Silentium et solitudo

Al meriggiare

La città riposa (Chiatante, 2025, p. 59)

The choice, in this case, derives from the ancestral air felt from the Italian sentence in the original, a spontaneous linguistic emersion from a pre-oneiric, dormant state at noon time. The translation transferred the expression to a historical level, from an Italian point of view. The same way, if the multilingualism of the subject "as it is" can be intended as object, the influence of digital technology, IT and Artificial Intelligence could not be excluded in today's life. *Respiro* is a collection where the urban setting, specifically Shenzhen's, famous for its technological innovation, is experienced as an environment no less essential to the contemporary poet than the natural setting. Programming language, digital information and media, as much as any other environmental element including architecture, dominate "this self-expression as an exploration of the self" (Convertino, 2025):

Crosslegged in front

Of artificial intelligence

Installations (Chiatante, 2025, p. 125)

Database

Is buffering with

The lilies (Chiatante, 2025, p. 48)

Singularity —

Extension/post dejavu

Text. style (Chiatante, 2025, p. 34)

The purposeful detachment from traditional Japanese haiku as a form is evident from these increasingly abstracting verses. Only graphic pauses have been employed for an effect of psychological silence, the minimal imagistic impressions display a tribute to the early Western

haiku, and the composition has been recorded spontaneously, as a "haiku moment". Can they be considered haiku?

Zanzotto's "pseudo-haiku" are collected in a volume titled *Haiku*, but Kerouac's American Haiku have been rather called "Pops". The question is, thus, whether in a stage of such versatility of the form both of Japanese contemporary haiku and of international haiku, tribute to any classical convention is still enough to give a non-Japanese short verse the name 'haiku'. Furthermore, to which extent the presumed poetic form stands as representative of a specific aesthetic effect? Will a haiku that stays faithful to some preferred original elements over others, whether the rhythmical, the semantic, the spiritual etc., be enough to hold on its label?

5. This Haiku is Not a Haiku (conclusion)

In *Respiro* can be observed a distinction between the composition of the verse as such and its final presentation as a poetic object. The writing is first inspired by East Asian aesthetics and their international re-propositions and re-interpretations. It is a tribute to several of the international haiku moments of the last 500 years. Great importance has been put then on the presentation of all "texts": not just the single verses, but also their sequencing within the collection, their pairing with illustrations, and the title *Metropolitan Haiku*. As with works from all the contemporary arts, a title may not represent the essence of the object but participate to its message, becoming itself another "text". The reference to haiku was an attempt to summarize the psychological and academic atmosphere within which the whole volume has been created, to suggest a direction to whichever aesthetic is opened to different readers by the word haiku, and, finally, as a tribute to the Zen approach of suchness and immediacy attached to the genre over the last century. It is, in effect, an artistic addition that attempts to stimulate and provoke the reader, thus inscribing itself in the tradition of the original haiku – or, rather, *senryu*.

The verse and its presentation, its title, its labeling as haiku have been intended in this case as semiotic texts, where the representation itself, the form can also be interpreted as autonomous from the represented objects. A perspective reminiscent of the birth of the abstract art created by the same generation as the futurist and imagist poets, among whom Ezra Pound himself. If poetry signifies its object, its own form, shape, sound can be perceived as text, too - a pure manifestation. A poem, a sequence of verses, a verse and an illustration, a haiku and a *haiga* together, a volume and its title, all can be taken as contents, as autonomous phenomena. Referring to art, Kandinskij analyzed the idea of "content" as the external form, the representation rather than the represented (Ponzio, 2004). Kazimir Malevich considered the artist as the one who re-discovers the world beyond its formal interpretation and labeling (Ponzio, 2004), a vision akin to the spiritual interpretation of Chinese classical poetry's minimal juxtaposition of objects, "free from human meaning-making" interpretation (Hinton, 2019). "The thing" as it is, again. Titling, labeling, structuring or attributing may be autonomously textual as well, and not narrating or signifying. Contradiction as a text, and thus:

This

Haiku is not

A haiku (Chiatante, 2025, p. 139)

If a haiku is not a haiku, then, Magritte's statements that "A word can take the place of an object in reality" (Magritte, 1929), and that: "No object is so tied to its name that we cannot find another one that suits it better" are all the more relevant to us.

In conclusion, whether the identity of a verse lies in its formal features, its label, or in its semiotic textuality, may depend on a series of interpretative layers, and not only on a technical or aesthetic perspective. Shenzhen's multicultural, metropolitan, and artistic setting, nested as it is in a region of rich historical and natural heritage, has inspired the compilation of

a volume that transcends a single writing style or art form. The flow of the city, in its development, harmonies and contradictions, lived through a Southern European mind, has been explored under the light of a genre that encompasses multiple styles and aesthetics, international haiku, but not necessarily described by haiku compositions. Whether texts titled haiku but without haiku formal elements can provide different levels of signification is still an open question. May it be a starting point for those who wish to express their own message while wading through venerable aesthetic traditions and the complexity of their experience. May it also spur further reflections on international haiku and on the necessity to label certain compositions as such.

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