
ESSAYS

*GENDAI HAIKU: WHAT IS IT?*¹

Hiroaki Sato

I. THE USE OF THE TERM QUESTIONED

In the past few years the term *gendai haiku* has attracted considerable attention in the United States.

Scott Metz, the editor of the online haiku magazine *Roadrunner*, says he is greatly interested in *gendai haiku*, and publishes haiku and articles to demonstrate that interest. He is particularly drawn, he says, to the work Richard Gilbert has done on Kaneko Tōta (金子兜太; b. 1919), which Jim Kacian, of the Haiku Foundation, has published through Red Moon Press.² And Gilbert, who leads the Kon Nichi Translation Group at Kumamoto University, in Japan, and says he is engaged in haiku activity “in country,” runs the Web site *gendaihaiku.com*. Paul Miller addressed *gendai haiku* in his detailed discussion at a Haiku North America gathering in August 2011.³

So, first, what is *gendai haiku* (現代俳句) as the term is understood in Japan? Does it mean anything special? The answer is, no, it just means “modern haiku.” It may have to do with the period covered, but not with content or an approach. And the period covered can be since the end of the 19th century or the 1930s to the present.

1. This essay is based on my Haiku Society of America talk on Dec. 8, 2012, “Gendai Haiku: What Is It?” and, further back, my HSA talk on March 19, 1988, “Takahashi Mutsuo and Natsuishi Ban’ya: Avant-garde and Traditional.”

2. I have reviewed one of the books. See *Modern Haiku* 44.1 (winter–spring 2013), 129–30.

3. See Paul Miller, “Haiku’s American Frontier,” *Frogpond* 35:1 (winter 2012), 102–18.

This is most clear in the encyclopedia on *gendai haiku*, called *Gendai haiku dai-jiten* (現代俳句大辞典), published in 1980 by Meiji Shobō (明治書房). Its editors' purpose was to supplement an earlier volume the same house published in 1957, *Haikai dai-jiten* (俳諧大辞典). The coverage of the earlier volume, as the title suggests, began with *haikai*, and ended with terms, poets, anthologies, movements, and such, up to the time of its editing, the mid-1950s. The coverage of *Gendai haiku dai-jiten*, in contrast, begins with Masaoka Shiki (正岡子規; 1867–1902), and ends about the time of its editing. That means the new encyclopedia covers everyone who is somebody in haiku and every notable phenomenon related to haiku spanning nearly a hundred years.

There also exist a number of selections and anthologies with *gendai haiku* in their titles that do not limit themselves to a readily identifiable group of haiku or haiku writers. *Gendai haiku dai-jiten* itself lists a dozen multi-volume collections that fit the bill. I have two of them, one the six-volume assemblage called *Gendai haiku zenshū* (現代俳句全集), published from 1977 to 1978 by Rippū Shobō (立風書房). Each of the six volumes carries six to ten haiku poets, each represented by 250 to 400 haiku in the poet's own selection, along with the poet's commentary on a dozen, topped with an overall assessment by a well-known writer of prose or poetry, but not necessarily of haiku. But from the perspective of our subject, one thing to be noted about this compilation is the editorial policy.

These volumes, the editors say, are designed to cover haiku poets since the days of Nakamura Kusatao (中村草田男; 1901–1983), Ishida Hakyō (石田波郷; 1913–1969), Katō Shūson (加藤楸邨; 1905–1993), and Saitō Sanki (西東三鬼; 1900–1962), but *not* to favor either those of “the traditionalist school” (伝統派) or those of “the avant-garde school” (前衛派).

Of the four haiku poets named, the first three—Nakamura, Ishida, and Katō—may have been relatively tame, at times categorized as they were as “the life-exploring school,” *jinsei tankyū-ha* (人生探究派), which means, I take it, those who “explore” what our life is all about and describe their findings in haiku. But the fourth and last, Saitō

Sanki, is known for the movement called “the Newly Rising Haiku,” *Shinkō Haiku* (新興俳句), that ended in arrests and jailing in 1941, just before Japan went to war with Great Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States. Some poets in the movement wrote haiku that were markedly antiwar and the authorities didn’t like it.

The editors of these six volumes were more eclectic. The four listed are: Iida Ryūta (飯田龍太; 1920–2007), a traditionalist haiku poet; Ōoka Makoto (大岡信; b. 1931), a non-tanka, non-haiku poet famed for his small but perennial newspaper column citing and commenting on tanka and haiku, both classical and modern; Takayanagi Shigenobu (高柳重信; 1923–1983), best known for his lined haiku, of whom we will see more later; and Yoshioka Minoru (吉岡実; 1919–1990), a Surrealist poet.

So what was it that happened that prompted these editors not to take a clear stance as regards *gendai haiku*?

In 1947, two years after Japan’s defeat in World War II, with the police state officially abolished, a group of thirty-five haiku poets got together to set up an association called Gendai Haiku Kyōkai (現代俳句協会). In doing so, the charter members, who included Kusatao, Hakyō, Shūson, and Sanki, appear to have had only one standard for membership: to exclude Takahama Kyoshi (高浜虚子; 1874–1959) and some big names aligned with him. Kyoshi was the foremost traditionalist who wielded “dictatorial” power through his magazine *Hototogisu*.

That obviously was the problem. In 1961 the association collapsed. The reasons were “unclear,” *Gendai haiku dai-jiten* says, but the main impetus apparently was the schism between those who thought haiku to be writings that adhered to the *yūki-teikei* (有季定型) format—those that included a *kigo* (季語), “seasonal word,” and written in *teikei* (定型), the “set form” of 5–7–5 syllables—and those who were a little more expansive, tolerant.

After all, haiku writers are a contentious lot. Kaneko Tōta tells us that his mother warned him not to get involved in haiku by saying “haiku is high jinx” (*haiku wa kenka*).⁴ She was in a position to know.

4. 俳句は喧嘩. Kaneko Tōta, *Waga sengo haiku-shi* (Iwanami Shoten, 1985), 75.

Her husband, a physician, was a haiku poet, and his haiku gatherings often ended in fist-fighting brawls among the participants.

The upshot: those who accepted non-*yūki-teikei* haiku decided to keep the original name of their association, the Gendai Haiku Kyōkai, and carried on. The splinter group called itself Haijin Kyōkai (俳人協会),⁵ with Nakamura Kusatao becoming its president. It was this new group that four decades later, in 1999, created a furor when it submitted a request or demand to publishers that the school textbooks they put out include only *yūki-teikei* haiku. They argued that in haiku “the *kigo* and the 5–7–5 set form are inseparable.”⁶

But there was a glitch. Although the Gendai Haiku Kyōkai⁷ continued to admit those who spurned *kigo* and “the set form,” and they still do so, that has only muddied the meaning of *gendai haiku*.

II. THE *ZEN'EI* QUESTION

Now, making a distinction between traditionalist and avant-garde would surely make sense, though the editors of the six volumes chose not to. The question, then, may be: Is there any group or association of haiku poets called avant-garde—*zen'ei* (前衛) in Japanese?

There apparently hasn't been any haiku organization calling itself *zen'ei*, but the notion of *zen'ei* in haiku has existed for some time. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, Takayanagi Shigenobu apparently was among the first to use the term when, in 1947, he characterized “the haiku saint” Bashō and the haiku he created as “pseudo-avant-garde.”⁸ In the chaos following the national catastrophe, the predominant sentiment was to dismiss anything associated with pre-defeat customs and practices as “feudalistic,” “undemocratic,” or else unworthy of “a new Japan.” The Kyoto University humanities professor Kuwabara Takeo (桑原武夫; 1904–1988) condemned haiku as “a secondary art,”⁹ but

5. Its Web site, <http://www.haijinkyokai.jp/about/member.html>, says that it started with 30 members, but by 2012 it had 15,149 members.

6. I owe to the haiku poet Shimada Gajō for this information.

7. <http://www.gendaihaiku.gr.jp/index.shtml>.

8. “Gi-zen'ei-ha,” Takayanagi Shigenobu, *Babel no tō* (Nagata Shobō, 1974), 26.

9. “Daini geijutsu—gendai haiku ni tsuite,” Kuwabara Takeo, *Daini geijutsu* (Kōdansha, 1986), 15–34. The essay appeared at the end of 1946.

that was not the only bomb thrown at haikudom. Other prominent critics did something similar.¹⁰

Takayanagi's debut book, in 1950, *Fukiko* (露子)—the title, “Butterbur Child,” is the name of an imagined girl¹⁰—consisted of haiku broken up into various lines, itself a radical departure: most haiku till then was written and printed in one line even though Ogiwara Seisensui (荻原井泉水; 1884–1976) had advocated breaking haiku into two lines four decades earlier. Also, all the haiku in the small handset booklet dealt with seemingly nonhaiku subjects. In fact, the short lineated pieces were accepted as haiku, you might say, because the author put them forward as such. The following is from his 1952 collection *Hakushaku-ryū* (伯爵領; “The Count's Territory”):¹²

森
の 夜
更 け の
拝
火 の 彌 撒
に
身 を 焼
く 彩
蛾¹³

10. “Haiboku no shi,” Takayanagi, *Babel no tō*, 10.

11. “Fukuko tanjō,” Takayanagi, *Babel no tō*, 172–76. The collection is included in its entirety, sans the afterword, in *Kaneko Tōta/Takayanagi Shigenobu shū*, the *Gendai haiku no sekai* 14 (Asahi Shinbunsha, 1984). For this book, no editor's name is given.

12. The book is included in *Kaneko Tōta/Takayanagi Shigenobu shū*, with the haiku on page 221. The title may come from “Count Ōmiya” that Takayanagi set up as an imagined interlocutor, as well as his being enamored with the French symbolist writer comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. A line from his writing is used as an epigraph for *Fukiko*.

13. Roman transliteration in disregard of line breaks: *mori no yofuke no haika no misa ni mi o yaku saiga*, a total of twenty-one syllables. In English: “In / a forest late / at night / in / a fire- / worshipping Mass / burning itself a / painted / moth.”

Takayanagi delighted in experimenting. *The Count's Territory* even had a piece entirely made up of ●, ○, and three other symbols. In all the pieces supplementing his 1979 collection *Nihon Kaigun* (日本海軍; “The Japanese Navy”), he used the last sound of each line to start the next line.

Predictably, by the time Takayanagi's first book came out, there were haiku poets identified as *zen'ei*, and some of them, in 1962, started a magazine titled *Kaitei* (海程; “The Marine Distance”) with *zen'ei* as its central concern.¹⁴ Kaneko Tōta was the leader of that group.

But Kaneko was — and has remained — far less daring than Takayanagi in form and content. The first adumbration of this may well have been his manifesto in the inaugural issue of *Kaitei*: “We love the shortest ‘set-form’ poetic form in the Japanese language called haiku.”¹⁵ From early on he talked about “social consciousness,” his preference of expressing himself over “haikuesqueness” — *haikusei* (俳句性) — and so on,¹⁶ but he has since reiterated the importance of not just retaining “the shortest poetic form,” if not the set form of 5–7–5 syllables, but also of showing the sense of season. And he has frowned upon lineation.¹⁷

Of course, we must remember that, however avant-garde he may appear in his lineated haiku, Takayanagi started out writing haiku in one line and continued to do so, on seemingly far more conventional subjects, under the pen name Yamakawa Semio (山川蟬夫; lit.: “mountain-river-cicada-man”). The critic Isoda Kōichi (磯田光一; 1931–1987) once cited John Cage in comparison with

14. Kaneko Tōta, *Waga sengo haiku-shi* (Iwanami Shoten, 1985), 219.

15. われわれは俳句という名の日本語の最短定型詩形を愛している。
The *Gendai haiku dai-jiten* entry on *Kaitei*.

16. Kaneko's 1961 argument with Yamaguchi Seishi is quoted in Takayanagi, *Babel no tō*, 272–74.

17. Kaneko clarified what he meant by “the short poetic form” in the book he wrote with the tanka poet Okai Takashi (岡井隆; b. 1928) *Tanshikei bungaku-ron* (Kinokuniya Shoten, 1963), where he emphasized the haiku “rhythm.” In his later “introduction to haiku,” *Haiku nyūmon* (Hokuyōsha, 1979), he stressed the importance of the sense of season as well as “the haiku form and rhythm.”

Arnold Schoenberg to question if Takayanagi really was “a destroyer of the [haiku] mode.” His conclusion: Takayanagi was “also a conservative.”¹⁸

Similarly, you may say Kaneko is a conservative at his core. A bureaucrat at the Bank of Japan (counterpart of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board) until his mandatory retirement in 1974 he may have been at one time regarded as the flag-bearer of one branch of *zen'ei* haiku in Japan and, yes, still carries an air of *zen'ei* about him. But in the end his haiku do not go all the way in discarding *yūki-teikei*.

In this regard, there were far more daring works during the half century preceding Takayanagi and Kaneko, as we see next.

III: TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL

Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, it was also during the chaos following Japan's defeat that the great non-haiku-writing haiku commentator Yamamoto Kenkichi (山本健吉; 1907–1988) made one of the clearest statements on the “haiku mode” (俳句様式) as he saw it, and stated a clear preference. In *Gendai haiku*, he referred to the two well-known schools of haiku that had developed and diverged after Shiki—one under Takahama Kyoshi, the other under Kawahigashi Hekigodō (河東碧梧桐; 1873–1937)—and declared that “the radical arguments” of Hekigodō and his followers, most prominently Nakatsuka Ippekirō (中塚一碧楼; 1887–1946), led to *jiyūritsu* (自由律; “free-rhythm”) haiku, which in the end “disappeared outside the realm of the haiku mode.” For Yamamoto, “the haiku is a short poem with 5–7–5, a total of 17 syllables, nothing more, nothing less.” To this form, the inclusion of a *kigo* was a must, in his view.¹⁹ He was a stickler for the *yūki-teikei* format.

Hekigodō did not initially write haiku deviating much from *yūki-teikei*. Later he began to do so, and wrote haiku like the following:

18. Isoda Kōichi, *Kaneko Tōta/Takayanagi Shigenobu shū*, 186. This volume includes Takayanagi's one-line haiku.

19. Yamamoto Kenkichi, *Gendai haiku* (Kadokawa Shoten, 1964; originally 1951 and 1952, in two volumes), I: 413.

子規居士母堂が屋根の剥げたのを指ざし日が漏れ

Shiki-koji bodō ga yane no hageta no o yubizashi hi ga more

Layman Shiki's mother pointing to the torn part of the roof the sun slanting in²⁰

This piece has no identifiable *kigo* and cannot really be scanned, containing as it does a total of twenty-four syllables that may come to 8–12–4, if one attempts breaking it down by syntactic unit. Hekigodō wrote it in 1917.

For comparison, that same year, Murakami Kijō (村上鬼城; 1865–1938), who had quickly become Kyoshi's star, published his first book of haiku, all pieces in it, of course, composed in *yūki-teikei* format. It contained some of the haiku that would make Kijō famous. Among them:

鷹老いてあはれ烏と飼はれけり

Taka oite aware karasu to kawarekeri

The hawk, having grown old, pity, is kept with a crow

(To digress a bit, this piece, a traditional haiku par excellence, shows the inherent oddness of *kigo* as a poetic concept. The hawk is a winter *kigo*, but the crow is not even a *kigo*, of any season, even as “crow's nest” (鴉の巢) is one for spring and “crow chicks” (鴉の子) one for summer.)

Many in the Proletarian Literary Movement — a movement from the 1920s to the 1930s that was influenced by socialist and communist ideals that exalted workers and rejected individualism — went further than Hekigodō and Ippekirō in turning out “free-rhythm” haiku, in the process spurning “written language” (文語) in favor of “spoken language” (口語). For example, Hashimoto Mudō (橋本夢道 1903–1974), who began to write haiku under the tutelage of Ogiwara Seisen-sui, wrote the following, in the late 1920s:

20. Kawahigashi Hekigodō et al., the *Nihon shijin zenshū* series, vol. 30 (Shichōsha, 1969), 27.

戦争ゴッコの鎮台様がおらが一家の薯畑をメチャメチャ
にして呉れやがった

*Sensō gokko no Chindai-sama ga oraga ikka no imo-batake o mecha-
mechani shitekureyagatta*

The Lord Garrison playing war all messed up mah family's sweet-
potato patch damn it²¹

This has forty-one syllables (8–7–7–6–7–6) or ten syllables more than the standard tanka. “Sweet-potato field” is an autumn *kigo*, but one doubts that Hashimoto used it as such. “The Lord Garrison” refers to the commander of a garrison. The garrison system in Japan was abolished in 1888 in favor of the divisional system, but the head of this army unit apparently continued to be called “garrison commander” well into the 1930s—here in the ostentatiously deferential form of “lord garrison.” Little wonder, then, Hashimoto was among those arrested and jailed, in 1941, for not just writing haiku that don't look like haiku but also for espousing politically dangerous views through them.

Again for comparison, in 1930, Mizuhara Shūōshi (水原秋桜子; 1892–1981) published his first book of haiku, *Katsushika* (葛飾), which foretold his break with Kyoshi, not over the *yūki-teikei* format but over what to describe in haiku.

馬酔木咲く金堂の扉にわが触れぬ

Ashibi saku Kondō no to ni waga furenu

Where *ashibi* bloom I touch the door of the Golden Hall

Shūōshi would adopt *ashibi* (馬酔木, *Pieris japonica*), a shrub known for clusters of lovely small pot-shaped flowers, for the name of his magazine the next year.²² The plant is known to be toxic, and so the name “tree that makes the horse drunk,” and it is a spring *kigo*.

21. Sakamoto Tadao, ed., *Tanka haiku senryū 101-nen: 1891–1992* (Shichōsha, 1992), 297.

22. For Shūōshi's essay that announced his break with Kyoshi, see my “Nature's Truth' and 'Truth in Literary Arts,” *Modern Haiku* 38.3 (autumn 2007), 25–45.

IV. KANEKO TŌTA AND HIS AVANT-GARDE SPIRIT

When you reflect on the great divergence from the standard mode of haiku that had occurred after Shiki's death even as those who stuck to *yūki-teikei* traditions firmly held ground, you will see that Kaneko Tōta is not really much of a rebel. He at times writes haiku hypersyllabic enough to render the results almost shapeless, but he never seems to have written hyper-lengthy pieces such as Hekigodō, Mudō, and those who agreed with them did. He at times writes without a *kigo*, but not always. For that matter, Kaneko seems never to have really abandoned the use of written language.

Let us consider some of his haiku—keeping in mind that I pick here only a few out of Kaneko's vast oeuvre. The collections of his haiku published in 2002 alone come to four fat volumes, each averaging 500 pages.

In his account of his own “postwar haiku history,” he notes the following two are from the period when he began to discuss with friends things like “plebeianism and the avant-garde spirit” (大衆性と前衛精神) in haiku—that is, in 1956 or so.

向き合う二階の夕餉たがいに秋灯満たし

Mukiau nikai no yūge tagaini akibi mitashi

Supper face to face on the second floor filling each with the autumn lamp

This one is close to being shapeless as it comes out as 4–7–4–6 or, syntactically, 11–10. (Kaneko has discussed “rhythmical” and “syntactical” breaks in haiku.) But, in comparison with the pieces by Hekigodō and Mudō, it appears to try to retain the haikuesque form. Also, *akibi*, “autumn lamp,” may not be an officially sanctioned *kigo*, but it does indicate a season.

車窓擦過の坂の一つの焚火怒る

Shasō sakka no saka no hitotu no takibi ikaru

The train window swishes by a slope a single bonfire angry²³

23. Kaneko, *Waga sengo haiku-shi*, 189.

This piece is hard to scan at first, perhaps because the alliteration of sibilants of the first half trips up the reader. When you repeat the piece a few times, though, you may be persuaded that this may well be one of the haiku of which Kaneko is proud from the viewpoint of “rhythm,” an element he stresses in his haiku prosody. In the end it works out as 7–7–6, not far from 5–7–5. Still, unless told in advance that this is meant to be a haiku, many are likely to take it to be just a somewhat slipshod sentence.

As it happens, this “bonfire” haiku is singled out for commentary by Katō Shūson in the *takibi* (“bonfire”) section of the *Nihon dai-saijiki* (日本大歳時記), Kōdansha’s sumptuously illustrated 1,670-page compendium of haiku categorized by *kigo*, published in 1983. Yamamoto Kenkichi provides detailed historical backgrounds for many of the more important *kigo*.

So, for comparison, let us look at not just one but several of the haiku chosen there by the well-known poets—all in *yūki-teikei* format. A *saijiki*, “seasonal account,” always lists a number of haiku for each *kigo*.

焚火かなし消えんとすれば育てられ

Takibi kanashi kien to sureba sodaterare

The bonfire’s sad; as it tries to fade it’s stirred up

Takahama Kyoshi

夜焚火に金色の崖峙てり

Yo-takibi ni kin'iro no gake sobadateri

Right by the night bonfire rises a golden bluff

Mizuhara Shūōshi

焚火火の粉吾の青春永きかな

Takibi hi no kona a no seishun nagaki kana

Bonfire fire sparks: my youth lasted long indeed

Nakamura Kusatao

日雇の焚火ぼうぼう崖こがす

Hiyatoi no takibi bōbō gake kogasu

Day laborers' bonfire aflame aflame scorches the bluff

Saitō Sanki

I'd like to cite two more of Kaneko's haiku from the viewpoint of *teikei*, if not from *yūki-teikei*. Kaneko does write haiku in the 5-7-5-syllable set form. Often, though, he seems intent on thwarting expectations even when the total syllabic count comes to seventeen. The following is a good example:

何処か扉がはためくケロイドの港

Doko ka to ga hatameku keroido no minato

Somewhere a door flaps in this keloidal port

He wrote this while assigned to Nagasaki where an atomic bomb was dropped. The word *keroido* (“keloid”) quickly became part of the Japanese language as a result of the hideous skin burns left on the bodies of those exposed to the high-temperature blast. For Kaneko this haiku may well be a good example embodying “social consciousness,” *shakaisei* (社会性), that he has become famous for emphasizing. Apart from that, it's hard for non-haiku aficionados to read this as a haiku because syntactically it demands to be broken into 3-6-8.

The last piece I cite is one Kaneko wrote around the time the Gendai Haiku Kyōkai collapsed and he and his group started *Kaitei*. It is chosen here because it may represent what makes *gendai* or *zen'ei* haiku at once charming and puzzling.

果樹園がシャツ一枚の俺の孤島

Kajuen ga shatsu ichimai no ore no kotō

The orchard is my island me only in a shirt

From the perspective of *teikei*, Kaneko could have easily used a *furigana*—a typographical device the writer can use to provide his preferred

reading to a word—to have the last word read *shima*; if he had, this piece would fall perfectly into the 5–7–5 pattern. That would have made it a haiku, at least formally, even though the poet’s meaning could still be a puzzler. But he didn’t, leaving the regular reader a little more confused.

In truth, at least one characteristic of the kind of *gendai haiku* Kaneko and those who write like him may be this slightly-off-balance aspect of their use of *teikei*—a point to be noted only because of Kaneko’s statement in the inaugural issue of *Kaitei* cited above: “We love the shortest set-form poetic form in the Japanese language called haiku.”

“The storms of *zen’ei* haiku” peaked around 1961–1962, says the *Gendai haiku dai-jiten*, “and passed after influencing even *yūki-teikei* writers.” Nevertheless, we must note that the effects of *zen’ei* have been various and extensive, and these are likely to be what Scott Metz identifies as some of the elements of *gendai* haiku or “the *gendai* movement” in selecting English haiku for *Roadrunner*: “modernity, contemporaneity, experimentation, surrealism, free-form, social consciousness/awareness.”²⁴

V. TRANSLATION

Kaneko Tōta is only one of a great many nontraditional haiku writers. To begin to understand whatever distinction there may be between traditionalist and nontraditionalist haiku, we need to look at far more haiku poets and their writings. *The Haiku Universe for the 21st Century* that Gendai Haiku Kyōkai compiled and published in English may be a good place to start,²⁵ with a few caveats.

First, as noted, Gendai Haiku Kyōkai is inclusive and accepts as its members people ranging from the great traditionalist Mori Sumio (森澄雄; 1919–2010) to, of course, Kaneko Tōta, who once served as its president. Takayanagi Shigenobu was once its vice executive director.

Second, differences between traditionalist and nontraditionalist often depend on tone, language, subject matter, context, the writer’s background the reader is expected to know, and such, but many of these things seldom come through clearly in translation.

24. By personal e-mail, Sept. 1, 2012.

25. I learned the existence of *The Haiku Universe* through Paul Miller’s talk, the draft of which he kindly sent to me.

And yes, there is the matter of translation. But that's another question altogether.