

SHOULD SENRYU BE PART OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE HAIKU?

by Jane Reichhold

Thanks to the instant connectedness that the Internet brings us, even the most obscure concepts and ideas leap from continent to landmass—heart to mind—within days. The availability of e-mail puts our desks, anywhere on the globe, next to each other. In this new atmosphere of closeness, I would like to ask all the editors of haiku magazines—paper and online—and the officers of haiku groups, as well as writers who love haiku, to reconsider their stand on senryu. We need to re-evaluate the history and current situation of senryu, and to make clear how we are to go forward in regard to its relationship to haiku.

A simple Web search can bring anyone the history of senryu, with its origins in the *maekuzuke* (an informal contest to write a tan renga with two links of 5–7–5 and 7–7 sound units written between two persons). In 1765 the first collection of these capping verses was published as *Haifu yanagidaru* by Karai Hachiemon, whose pen-name, Senryū, means “River Willow.” Over the next hundred years 160 further editions of these collections were published until the submitted poems became too raunchy and of too poor quality to publish. Currently there is an effort in Japan to rehabilitate and resurrect senryu. What may not be so easily discovered is how writers and publishers of English-language haiku and senryu differ from their colleagues in Japan. I would like to lead you through various divergences and show how we have gotten ourselves into the current situation.

In Japan the difference between a haiku and a senryu is very clear. Traditionally a haiku was signed and senryu were not. A classic Japanese haiku has a *kigo* and a *kidai* (season word and season reference), while this is not required in the senryu. In modern times this rule has been relaxed, both in Japan and the West, to the degree that the boundaries between the two verses are becoming blurred. In English-language haiku we smudged that line long ago as we wrote so many of

the poems we called haiku without a solid knowledge of season words and how to use them.

The best distinction we Westerners could devise was to say haiku are about nature and senryu are about human nature. This assertion was soon undermined, however, by the realization that humans are indeed a part of the natural world and to make this separation was not only foolish, but invalid. People are a part of the natural world. Even from the beginnings, many of the observations in English-language haiku were aimed at elucidating human actions and reactions. This trend was reinforced by our experiments in the related form of renga, which contains haiku and haiku-like poems that reflect humanity and human actions.

Perhaps if we had kept, and popularized, the Japanese terms *haikai* (any stanza in a renga) and *hokku* (specifically the first stanza of a renga and the forerunner of modern haiku), we could have seen more clearly the differences and then had available the proper terms for naming two kinds of haiku. The first translations from the Japanese into English and French kept the terms *hokku* and *haikai*, and eventually adopted the word “haiku,” which Shiki invented about 1900. So it seems, in spite of some efforts to untangle the knot, we are stuck with calling our poems haiku, but I do not see this as a problem. The greater difficulty arises when we try to incorporate another type of writing called senryu into our English-language haiku.

Since the English-language haiku and English-language senryu have exactly the same form, the same subject matter, and most of the time the same attributes, some persons have tried to delineate the two, as Michael Dylan Welch does: “I think poems that are haiku or senryu fall into four categories: 1) serious nature poems (typically with a season word, but to my mind needn’t always have one); 2) serious human-centered poems; 3) humorous nature poems (rare); or 4) humorous human-centered poems. Categories 1 and 4 are clearly haiku and senryu, respectively. The poems in categories 2 and 3, however, fall in grey areas, and it is poems in these areas that cause most people problems.”

The quandary this puts us in is that no two persons can agree on what is humorous and what is serious and how much satire, or humor,

or wit causes a poem to cross from one type to the other. Since the *hai* of haiku can be translated as “joke,” or “comic,” or “funny,” we need to try to find a reason to name some haiku senryu based on the criterion of humor. Because humor or comic is part of the name, the English-language haiku is capable of incorporating any degree of wit or satire or any feeling we humans experience.

Yet the old idea that one of the two kinds of haiku should be called senryu persists. Even editors who may not agree on this will continue to publish haiku under the double name of haiku/senryu. Often they will admit they cannot tell, or don't want to decide, the difference between the two types so they avoid the issue or cover their bases by making a new compound word. Even Welch tempers his definition: “The difference between haiku and senryu? To some degree it doesn't matter, if one's focus is purely on good poetry, because these labels are the tools of academic analysis, not poetic appreciation.”

This comment simply avoids the issue. As publishers of haiku we need to be informed, to inform, and to respond to the situation for several reasons:

1. In Japan senryu are not considered a part of the haiku scene; senryu are not written by haiku poets. They never have been and there are no plans to change the barriers. For the most part, senryu writers do not see their work as haiku. In his *Modern Senryu in English*, Shuho Ohno writes: “According to the book published in 1984 by Suika Seki: ‘In *Japanese* textbooks, poetry, short poems called *Tanka* and *Haiku* have been introduced but no *Senryū*.... So there is a necessity to start a movement so that current *Senryū* will be introduced similar to *Haiku* and *Tanka*.’” If this is so, then as late as 1984 the Japanese educational system did not recognize senryu as a poetic form.

2. Japan has a ranking system for poets that is very strict and clear. On the top are tanka poets, then come haiku writers, and lastly there are those who write senryu. In the West, by trying to be democratic we have opted to include senryu as a part of our haiku poetry. The Japanese clearly have not.

3. In one way the Japanese ranking system did transport itself into English-language haiku in the early days. At that time “senryu” was a

pejorative term for haiku that were unsuccessful, immature, or failed in some other way. This is now changing to the extent that some English writers now actually call themselves senryu writers.

There will probably always be persons in the scene who enjoy seeing themselves as the rebels, the ones who say they bring more fun or impropriety to haiku. For this, or some other reason, they wish to keep the term “senryu” alive and active.

If these poets decide to do this, they have an obligation to find some way to give senryu some visual or typographical marker to distinguish it easily from haiku. Here is the chance for writers in English to indicate clearly that a certain poem is meant to be a senryu and not a haiku. There seems to be considerable interest these days in one-line haiku. I would hesitate to try to make it a rule that three-line poems are haiku while one-liners are senryu, although this idea might make sense at some level insofar as many Japanese-language senryu do not employ the *kire* or *kireji*—“cut” or “cutting words.” This makes them, when translated correctly into English, appear as a complete sentence. Interesting advances are being made by one-line haiku and the way it is read, and I would regret seeing this format relegated to the lesser genre of senryu.

Even two-line haiku has precedent in the two-line stanzas of renga and in the rarer explorations of parallels in haiku.

Because so many modern haiku are being written in lower case, without caps, and using minimal punctuation, we might consider requiring that senryu, written in either one or three lines, begin with a capital letter and end with a period. This would underscore the idea of a senryu as a sentence and bring it more in line with the Greek epigram and aphorism. We already have an example of this in the work of Alexis Rotella who, by the founding of the senryu magazine *Prune Juice*, set herself up as a major standard-bearer of senryu, is one of the rare writers still using caps and punctuation in her haiku and what she calls senryu.

Another approach is suggested by R.H. Blyth, who used a system of indentations to differentiate translations of haiku and senryu. For example, he typeset haiku (as in his book *Senryu: Japanese Satirical Verses* [1949]) using capitalization, punctuation, and indentation like this:

Autumn sun
 Red on the leaves
 Of the maple.

and senryu (as in his *Japanese Life and Character in Senryu* [1960]) like this:

The autumn sun
 Is red on the leaves
 Of the maple.

But would it not be easier to identify a poem as a senryu if it simply looked like this?

The autumn sun
 is red on the leaves
 of the maple.

What I am asking for is that editors of haiku publications consider dropping the word or category “senryu” from their typology of poems. Please stop categorizing our poems incorrectly! Since May 2012 we have made the *AHAforum* a senryu-free site. We wish that no haiku on the site be labeled as a senryu by the author or anyone else. This does not mean that the word is banned or that no one can use it. Of course, if there is a discussion on the subject we will use the term.

Another positive sign is evidenced in the “Afterword” of *Haiku hier und heute* (“Haiku Here and Today”), the new anthology of German-language haiku. After a paragraph assessing the confusion presently caused by senryu in the haiku community, editors Udo Wenzel and Rainer Stolz conclude: “Therefore these terms are not given any attention in our collection.” Here’s a step in the right direction.

It seems especially necessary for the Haiku Society of America (as well as haiku groups of other countries) to return to being a haiku organization and leave senryu to senryu writers. If the HSA will not permit tanka into their purview, what grounds can they have for supporting senryu by continuing the name with an annual senryu contest? *Modern Haiku* still hands out a best-senryu-of-issue award. Both *Frogpond* and

Modern Haiku present new submissions in sections titled “Haiku & Senryu.”

None of the old haiku masters of Japan wrote senryu; why do we still drag senryu into our haiku community? For those of you who wish to support and promote senryu, I feel you have an obligation to consider, with all seriousness, how you can create a form or typographical arrangement that instantly signals that the poem is not a haiku but is intended to be a senryu. For too long you have hidden under the skirts of haiku writers and caused confusion and misunderstanding.

Besides, none of us can pronounce senryu properly!