

**DEPOPULARIZING THE POPULAR:
TENTORI HAIKAI AND THE BASHŌ REVIVAL¹**

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Haikai is not often discussed in the context of popular culture. It is typically categorized as "classical" Japanese literature. This term suggests that its objects of study are antithetical to popular culture, which is typically a designation for works outside the literary canon. However, in the first centuries of its development, *haikai* was decidedly uncanonical. Originally derived from the elite linked verse form *renga*, the comic form *haikai* got its start as an ephemeral, expendable kind of amusement, and its transformation into a genre of literature that merited refined aesthetic appreciation was a process that took hundreds of years. In this paper, I examine one part of this process: the emergence of the Bashō Revival movement in the middle of the eighteenth century. I explore the ways that the Revival poets, who were commoners and low-ranking samurai, tried to reshape *haikai* into a poetic form equal to that of the elite forms *waka* and *renga*, and in doing so to raise their own status in an era that otherwise offered little social mobility.

While the first part of the eighteenth century was a period of remarkable growth in the number of *haikai* schools and practitioners, the Revival poets viewed their genre's success as problematic, as they equated popularization with vulgarization. Since by definition *haikai* relies on language and imagery that grounds itself in the popular, the Revival poets' stance would appear to be paradoxical. Although they represented only a minority in the *haikai* community of their day, ultimately it is the Revival poets and their successors, rather than their more popular rivals, who eventually came to be regarded as the central figures of *haikai* history. How did this happen?

To consider this question, I will discuss the characteristics of *haikai* that made it a part of popular culture; examine the circumstances of historical development of *haikai* that led to the rise of *tentori* 点取 (point-

¹ This paper was originally given as a paper presentation at the April 17, 2004 meeting of the Southern Japan Seminar in Atlanta, Georgia.

scoring) *haikai*, and finally show how the Revival poets' efforts to counteract what they saw as the cheapening effect of popularization as a defense not only of the dignity of *haikai*, but of their own movement.

The Rise of *Tentori Haikai*

In 1751, the Kyoto *haikai* poet Mōotsu 毛越 published an anthology, *Kokon tanzaku shū* 古今短冊集 (*Ancient and Modern Poetry Card Anthology*), a collection of exemplary *hokku* verses of the past and present printed in the form of reproductions of the poets' own calligraphy. Mōotsu's collection aimed to reinvigorate interest in the work of *haikai* poets of the past – especially that of Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) – showing it to be superior to the common type of *haikai* practitioner of the day. *Kokon tanzaku shū* was not particularly influential, but it is worth taking a look at because of its preface, which was written by the eighteenth century's most prominent *haikai* poet, Yosa Buson (1716-1784).

At the time that Mōotsu asked him to write the preface, Buson was a struggling young painter, recently returned to the Kansai area in order to seek his fortune. He was not a professional *haikai* poet, but he had a good reputation in Edo in the Tōhoku area based on his work with the Yahantei school of Hayano Hajin (1678-1742).² Buson's preface, while containing the usual conventional words of praise for the anthology's editor, also included a damning indictment of the mainstream *haikai* poets of the day:

Nowadays those who are prominent in *haikai* have different approaches to the various styles, castigating this one and scolding that one, and they thrust out their elbows and puff out their cheeks, proclaiming themselves *haikai* masters (*sōshō* 宗匠). They will flatter the rich, and cause the small-minded [i.e., *tentori* poets] to run wild, and compile anthologies that list numerous unpolished verses. Those who really know *haikai* frown and throw them away. Indeed, old priest Sainen-bō 西念坊 uses their verses to patch his paper coverlet at night, and old nun Myōshin-ni 妙心尼 uses them to label her jars of miso; is this not a disgrace?³

² Hajin was a student of Bashō disciples Kikaku and Ransetsu. Buson joined his school around 1734, when he was 20, and he remained a member until Hajin's death.

³ *Buson zenshū*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994) p. 90. Sainen-bō and Myōshin-ni are typical clerical names; they refer to no one in particular.

Buson's remarks here are a condemnation of practitioners of a highly commercialized form of *haikai*, *tentori* 点取 or point-scoring *haikai*, which had become wildly successful in the early part of the eighteenth century. In *tentori haikai*, a *tenja* 点者, or verse-marker, would set the verse, a go-between would distribute it to students, and then the go-between would deliver the students' responses back to the *tenja*, who would grade them with points. Both the *tenja* and the go-between collected fees for their services, and *tentori haikai* became very lucrative. From the students' point of view, this kind of *haikai* was extremely entertaining: it did not require extensive education or special training, people enjoyed competing with other members of their groups, and it even became a form of gambling as students vied with one another to gain the most points.⁴

While *tentori haikai* offered a means for some people to make a living off their literary talents, other more idealistic poets despised it. Point scoring in itself was not necessarily the problem – similar systems had been used by teachers of *waka* and *renga* as a pedagogical tool for centuries. However, competition for points became an end in itself, and quickly degenerated into an activity that was little more than a game.⁵ Also, *tentori* practitioners were less concerned with the craft of poetry than with writing something impressive and witty, to dazzle others and win points from the *tenja*. In this sense, *tentori haikai* strongly favored *zoku* 俗 – the mundane or commonplace – over *ga* 雅 – the elegant and refined.

How to balance *zoku* and *ga* in *haikai* was a perennial question. The early seventeenth century poet credited as *haikai*'s founder, Matsunaga Teitoku 松永貞徳 (1571-1653), defined *haikai* as poetry that contained a *haigon* 俳言, or *haikai* word.⁶ By that, he meant words and imagery that came from a lexicon much broader than the highly restricted one permitted to poets writing in *waka* and *renga*.

The vocabulary of *waka* and *renga* was limited to words contained in a few sources, like the early imperial poetry anthologies, as well as *Ise*

⁴ Satō Katsuaki 佐藤勝明, et al., eds., *Renku no sekai* 連句の世界 (Tokyo: Shintensha, 1997), pp. 89-90.

⁵ Suzuki Katsutada 鈴木勝忠, "Kyōhō haikai shi" 享保俳諧史, *Haikai shi* 俳諧史, vol. 1 of *Haiku kōza* 俳句講座 (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1959), p. 210.

⁶ Teitoku, *Tensuishō* 天水抄 (compiled 1644). Cited in Satō, *Renku no sekai*, pp. 44-45.

monogatari and *Genji monogatari*. *Haikai*, however, was meant to be comic, or at the very least to include a twist of insight that brought together two disparate worlds – the sensitive, exalted realm of *ga* that was included in allusions to classical literature, and the ordinary, everyday realm of *zoku* that was contained within the *haigon*. *Haigon* referred to a wide range of language, ranging from Buddhist terms and Chinese loanwords to *zokugo* 俗語,⁷ the vocabulary of everyday life. The friction between the classical and the vernacular, between *ga* and *zoku*, generated the spark that ignited *haikai*'s humor and insightfulness.

Both *ga* and *zoku* were necessary in *haikai*, but the balance between them was not always easy to manage. In their eagerness to produce verses that were clever and exciting, *tentori* poets tended to lean heavily towards the *zoku* to create effects that would win them the most points. Thus, more fastidious poets felt justified in regarding their work as vulgar and lacking in real craft.

The other aspect of *tentori haikai* that dismayed more high-minded poets was that *haikai* itself was becoming a commodity; *tenja* were more interested in profit than in literary quality and made little effort to cultivate taste and sensitivity in their students. Eager to increase their income and maximize the number of students, many were willing to lower their standards in order to make themselves appealing to the largest number of people possible. The growing sophistication of print culture and advances in communication and travel in the eighteenth century also contributed to the commercialization of *haikai*. The accessibility of *haikai* texts and the ease with which disciples could correspond with, and even meet, distant *tenja* put the practice within reach of people even in provincial towns and rural areas, and the *tenja*, in turn, were not slow to capitalize on this.

Matsuo Bashō and His Successors

One poet who resolved with consummate skill the problem of how to balance *ga* and *zoku* was Matsuo Bashō. After spending his early years working as a *tenja*, Bashō abandoned the role of a for-profit poet and set about seeking a higher standard for *haikai*. Instead of asking for payment for services, Bashō came up with various ways of receiving the patronage of his disciples and friends that did not involve cash, largely by accepting

⁷ Ogata Tsutomu 尾形 侑, *Haibungaku daijiten* 俳文学大辞典 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1995), pp. 721-722.

lodging and gifts in exchange for his teaching. He was unwaveringly committed to the ideal of making *haikai* the equal of *waka* and *renga*. One of his most famous formulations was "Saigyō's 西行 *waka*, Sōgi's 宗祇 *renga*, Sesshū's 雪舟 painting, and Rikyū's 利休 tea all have the same thing in common"⁸ with *haikai*, in other words that *haikai* poets had the potential to aspire to the same level of greatness as the greatest of *waka* and *renga* poets, as well as the greatest of painters and tea ceremony masters. On the face of it, this may not seem like such a radical statement, but it is important to remember that the origins of *haikai* were its function as a recreational interlude between serious bouts of *renga*. It is probably an exaggeration to call it pulp literature, but it might be more safely referred to as "trash," because it was almost always discarded at the end of a *renga* session, even when the rest of the day's labors – the *ushin* 有心 or standard *renga* was recorded and preserved.⁹ By calling *haikai* the equal of *waka* and *renga*, Bashō was making a very bold claim for the value of his genre, setting it on the same level with the elite genres of the past.

Bashō's statement also stands out because in terms of social status, the poets who wrote *haikai* were inferior to those who composed *waka* and *renga*. The innermost secrets of *waka* were carefully guarded by the aristocratic houses whose intellectual property they protected; and while persons of lower status (*jige* 地下) could become proficient at *renga*, *ushin renga* was an elite genre. Even someone like Teitoku, whose great literary skill was acknowledged by prominent intellectuals of the day, was excluded from the highest levels of *waka* training because he was a commoner. Comic *renga* – known as *mushin* 無心 or *haikai no renga*, eventually became the genre of choice for commoners.¹⁰ In the early modern period, as commoners began the process of transforming this offshoot of serious *renga*

⁸ Sugiura Seiichirō 杉浦正一郎, et al., eds. *Bashō bunshū* 芭蕉文集, vol. 46 of *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 日本古典文学大 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1959), p. 51. Saigyō (1118-1190) was a priest, *waka* poet, and traveler; Sōgi (1421-1502) was a renowned *renga* poet; Sesshū (1420-1506) was famous for his ink painting; Sen no Rikyū 千利休 (1522-1591) was a founder of the tea ceremony.

⁹ Satō, *Renku no sekai*, pp. 91-93.

¹⁰ Kuriyama Riichi 栗山理一, *Haikai shi* 俳諧史 (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1963), pp. 52-60.

into the independent genre *haikai*, their aspirations for it mirrored those that were stirring elsewhere in their lives as a product of the increased prosperity brought by the Tokugawa peace, that is to say, for greater dignity and prestige.

While Bashō and some of his contemporaries started a trend towards a more serious-minded kind of *haikai*, the momentum was lost after his death. *Tentori haikai* continued to attract increasing numbers of followers, and Bashō's disciples splintered into numerous groups. Just like the *tentori* poets, the schools founded by Bashō's disciples competed with one another for students, and even used their affiliation with Bashō as a selling point, each of them claiming exclusive possession of his authentic teaching.

Fifty years later, the Bashō Revival movement emerged from the *haikai* community's chaotic landscape of rivalry, competition, and commercialization. The movement was made up of a loose affiliation of poets, most of whom belonged to schools associated with Bashō, i.e., the Shōmon 蕉門, and included poets like Buson, Takai Kitō 高井几董 (1741-1789), and Katō Kyōtai 加藤暁台 (1732-1792). They were different from their contemporaries in that they advocated a return to the original ideals of Bashō, seeking an understanding of his teachings that was unmediated by an adherence to factional orthodoxies; instead, they aimed to recover the true essence of Bashō's teachings through close examination of his works. They frowned on the un-aesthetic excesses of *tentori haikai* practitioners, and viewed the *tenja* who catered to them as avaricious, talentless toadies.¹¹

The *Bunjin* Ideal

The Bashō Revival poets' hostility towards the *tentori* poets can be attributed to a number of factors. One of them was a development that at first glance might seem unrelated to *haikai*: the rise of the ideal of the *bunjin*, or literatus, which had its origins in the contemporary surge of interest in Sinophilic culture, particularly Chinese poetry and painting.

The Tokugawa shoguns were avid supporters of Chinese studies, particularly Confucian philosophy, as a means of maintaining social order. As knowledge of Chinese philosophy, ethics, and history was disseminated, interest in other aspects of Chinese learning developed. One of the high

¹¹ Konishi Jin'ichi 小西甚一, *Haiku no sekai* 俳句の世界 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1995), pp. 195-197.

points of this trend was the emergence of Ogyū Sorai's 萩生徂徠 (1666-1782) *kobunjigaku* 古文辞学, or study of ancient rhetoric school. Sorai emphasized accomplishment in a wide range of artistic pursuits, and prominent among them was poetry. He insisted on the importance of achieving a direct understanding of classical Chinese texts without the encumbrance of commentaries. For Sorai and his followers the Chinese tradition was not something to be passively memorized, but lived out in practice, and poetry was central to the well-lived life.

Sorai and his followers were just one example of a more general trend towards interest in Chinese arts. Increasing numbers of wealthy people, including many commoners, developed a great fascination for Chinese things and skills, and as they possessed great resources in terms of money and leisure time, they were in a position to pay for them. The ideal of the *bunjin* 文人, or literati, arose in this context. *Bunjin* (Chinese: *wenren*) originally referred to scholar-gentlemen who, at various points in Chinese history, withdrew from public service – either voluntarily, in protest, or under duress – in order to pursue reclusive lives of artistic accomplishment. Amateurism was their hallmark; they painted, wrote poetry, and did calligraphy for purposes of self-cultivation; they looked down on professional artists who did the same for money. The *bunjin* ideal appealed to wealthy Japanese commoners because it championed the amateur. Financially secure through other means, they practiced poetry for pleasure, and in doing so claimed the prestige of the Chinese literatus, who disdained profit.¹²

Many *haikai* poets had a close affiliation with the sinophile groups that gave rise to the idealization of the *bunjin*, particularly those *haikai* poets who also wrote *kanshi* (Chinese verse). As a result, there were many points of intersection between the *bunjin* ideal and ideology of the Bashō Revival. In the first place, stress on the value of poetry – writing it as well as reading it – was important to both. In the second place, Revival poets shared with adherents of the *bunjin* ideal a distaste for overt competition over profit and fame. Again, amateurism was the hallmark of the Chinese *wenren*, who painted for the sake of self-cultivation, unlike the professional court painters who worked to please patrons. This had a special resonance for wealthy commoners attracted to the *bunjin* ideal and Revival *haikai* alike. Denied access to real elites (i.e., aristocratic status, participation in

¹² Kuriyama, *Haikai shi*, pp. 202-208.

government) and contemptuous of the excesses of commoner culture, the glorification of the amateur was a way for non-elite *haikai* poets to aspire to some kind of elite status, insofar as it gave them the moral ground on which to stand as they castigated popular *tenja* for being venal and profit-driven.

The Anxiety of Reception

A second factor that contributed to the Bashō Revival poets' hostility towards *tentori haikai* can be referred to as an anxiety of reception, that is, a deep sense of unease engendered by their confrontation and unprecedented large audience of readers.¹³ The anxiety of reception is a term coined by Lucy Newlin to describe the sense of crisis she observed in eighteenth century English Romantic poets, who struggled to create and defend their artistic identity and authorial integrity in an era when the relationship between writers and their audience changed rapidly as more and more people had access to books. Unlike Harold Bloom's formulation of the anxiety of influence – the theory that "strong" writers battle with the legacy of their literary predecessors in order to establish their own literary identity the notion of anxiety of reception acknowledges the powerful effect that changes in the make-up of the reading public have on literary texts.

In eighteenth century Japan, as in Europe, a new audience of reader-writers emerged alongside the improvements in literacy, advancement in publishing technology, and the professionalization of various roles related to the production of printed texts that took place in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These developments had particularly powerful implications for *haikai*, whose market was drawn from precisely the group of readers that was growing the fastest – urban and rural commoners. As the number of *haikai* consumers grew, there were more of those whose interpretive competence was uncertain. As a result, struggles over standards, authority, and norms engendered an even greater sense of urgency.

As an antidote to *tentori haikai*, Bashō was a fitting choice. He stood out from his predecessors and contemporaries because of his serious approach to *haikai*. Thoroughly versed in the classical tradition yet innovative and experimental, Bashō infused what was still a frivolous and somewhat simpleminded genre compared with the profundity and dignity of *waka* and *renga*. At the same time, his verse and his teaching style was

¹³Lucy Newlin, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. vii-x.

accessible to a wide range of people in the cities and the countryside. Even more importantly, though his life was relatively short, he spent a good deal of it traveling, and as a result he had a large number of followers, many of whom went on to found their own *haikai* school and use their connections with Bashō as a mark of legitimacy.

The successors to these Bashō disciples and their students became the core of the Revival movement. Their efforts to resist the commercialization of *haikai* associated with the *tentori* poets were extremely successful, but had a somewhat paradoxical effect. The Revival poets' embrace of Bashō's teachings as a way to confer distinction on themselves created an elite among practitioners of this commoners' genre. This was an elite that more and more poets aspired to join, and, despite the best intentions of the Revival poets to depopularize *haikai*, their work actually ended up doing more to popularize it than anything achieved by the *tentori* poets.