

# The mythification of haiku in Mexican literature

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**Summary** The insatiable quest for the exotic that characterized the modernist movement in Latin America spawned the importation of poetic genres from geographically and culturally distant countries leaving profound imprints on literary traditions in the region. Mexican poetry was particularly marked by exotic modernist representations of the far East and the new creative movements they inspired. However, in many cases this enthusiasm for novelty would translate new poetic forms into orientalized representations or conceptual distortions. The introduction of haiku into Mexican literary circles exemplifies this orientalist process and the propagation of essentialist discourse related to this poetic genre. Theories rooted in *nihonjinron* on the nature of haiku by prominent Mexican literary figures like the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, generated orientalist notions on the historic development and literary conceptualization of this Japanese poetry. The present essay attempts to shed light on how *nihonjinron* discourse propagated orientalist notions on haiku that shaped the reception and the conceptualization of this poetic genre in Mexican literary circles.

Keywords : Mexican Literature, haiku, *nihonjinron*, poetry, orientalization.

The Japanese haiku was first introduced into Mexican literary circles in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century by the poet Jose Juan Tablada (1871-1945) and has remained a prevalent poetic genre in this Latin American country. The Modernist movement and its insatiable quest for unique esthetic expression led the Mexican poet to Japan where he became intrigued with Japanese culture and art. Inspired by the concise poetics of haiku, Tablada published *Un día... Poemas Sintéticos* [One day.. Synthetic Poems] (1919) and proclaimed himself the founder of haiku in Spanish language. Since Tablada, numerous Mexican literati have endeavored in the composition of haiku, among which are José Rubén Romero (1890-1952), Francisco Monterde (1894-1985), Armando Duvalier (1914-1989), José Emilio Pacheco (1939-2014) and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1914-1998). Contemporary discussions on haiku in Mexican literary circles invariably evoke associations of spirituality particular to Japanese ethics and culture. Perpetuated by modernist discourse, these essentialist notions have forged a profound impact on the perception of Japanese art and thought in Mexican literary circles. This is illustrated in the words of Octavio Paz: “For us Japan has never been a school of doctrines, system or philosophy, but a

sensibility” (1973: 115).

Modernism and its exaltation of Asian esthetics has engendered a binary paradigm that places the West in essential opposition with “Oriental” spirituality and artistic sensibilities. In an interview, the Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco highlights the idealization of haiku “sensibility” when he claims that it is rooted “in the profound love for nature [...], different from our culture which is inspired by hate and destruction of nature” (Pérez, 2019). In spite of the extreme conceptual diversity of haiku throughout its long history, the continual idealization of the “Orient” has led to a predominance of discussions on this concise poetry that center on poets that personify essentialist notions of Japaneseness, as is the case with Matsuo Basho. Ironically, much of the orientalist discourse on Japan that predominates Western literary circles has been cultivated and perpetuated by Japanese themselves in their discussions on the nature of their own identity and Japaneseness. These inquiries into Japanese identity, called *nihonjinron*, have not only had a profound influence on Western cultural representations of this Asian country, but have also had considerable bearing on the concept of Japaneseness that the Japanese themselves have

cultivated within as well as outside of their society. This study attempts to demonstrate how *nihonjinron* discourse has conditioned perceptions of haiku in Mexican literary circles and how it has inculcated orientalist and essentialist notions of this concise poetry and the culture in which it originated.

### ***Nihonjinron* and Japanese Uniqueness**

The modernization and westernization of Japan that commenced with the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) and beginning of the Meiji Restoration (1868) not only put the country on an economic path that would eventually position it among the most affluent nations on the planet, but also engendered an identity crisis that would afflict the population to present day. The modernization of their society led the Japanese to the realization of their economic and military inferiority to the West, and with it a desperate effort to reconceptualize the notion of Japaneseness. The result of this self-reflection was the birth of a new genre of publication and public debate that underlined the exceptionality of the Japanese people and their culture. Proponents of *Nihonjinron*, or the theory of Japaneseness, propagated discourse characterized by essentialist notions about the exceptionality of Japanese people and their culture. *Nihonjinron* discourse is dedicated to systemically projecting stereotypical images that foment distorted ideas about the ethnic homogeneity of the Japanese and their cultural and racial superiority. Examples of this are illustrated in Tetsuro Watuji's *Fudo* (1935) in which the author establishes an essentialist relationship between the unique Japanese character and the country's climate. In the same way, Sukehiro Hirakawa, in his book *Seiyoujin no Shintokan* (2013), insists that Japanese identity can be traced to the uniqueness of its language. In this way proponents of *Nihonjinron* attempt to establish biological and environmental relationships that elucidate the nature of Japaneseness in a type of self-orientalization. The continued popularity of books like "*Amae*" *No Kouzou* (The Structure of *Amae*) by Takeo Doi (1971) and *Tate No Shakai No Ningen Kankei: Tan Itsu Shakai No Riron* (Human Relationships in a Vertical Society: Theory of a Homogeneous Society) by Chie Nakane (1967)

attests to the interest in these theories and in constructing a collective identity. This nationalist project is not limited to convincing the Japanese population of their own exceptionality, but also propagating these essentialist notions in the West with the objective of forging a place among the hegemonic powers that be. Publications written in English for Western readership such as *Bushido* (1905) by Inazou Nitobe and *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959) by Daisetsu Suzuki, both of which still considered important references into Japanese culture and thought, underline the impact this discourse has had on perceptions of Japan and its society in Western literary circles. However, these publications have been highly criticized by academics who point out the emphasis these authors place on essentialist and exoticized concepts. Suzuki's own words substantiate such criticism: "Very likely, the most characteristic thing in the temperament of the Eastern people is the ability to grasp life from within not from without" (1959: 24).

The concept of Japanese exceptionality propagated by *nihonjinron* proponents would be reinforced in the West with the publication in 1946 of *The Chrysanthemum and The Sword* by Ruth Benedict, American sociologist employed by the United States government to elucidate the incomprehensible culture of the Japanese enemy. In her analysis, Benedict often resorts to stereotypical and essentialist notions to characterize Japaneseness, reinforcing the binary paradigm asserted by *nihonjinron*: Japan and the rest.

Sleeping is another favored indulgence. It is one of the most accomplished arts of the Japanese. They sleep with complete relaxation, in any position, and under circumstances we regard as sheer impossibilities. This has surprised many Western students of the Japanese (180).

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas of Japanese exceptionality originating in *nihonjinron* discourse have inspired countless literary works on Japan that portray exotic travels and fantastic stories incomprehensible to the Western reader.

Classic works by such writers as Lafcadio Hern (1850-1904), Pierre Loti (1850-1923) and Enrique Gómez Carrillo (1873-1927) would reinforce orientalist perceptions about the paradoxical Japanese in essential contrast with the West. Such works would inspire an acute interest in Japanese literature, especially in haiku whose supposed spirituality left a profound impact on Mexican poetics. However, the concept of haiku as propagated in Mexican literature would be strongly rooted in *nihonjinron* discourse, and, as a consequence, often reflected an exoticized version of this poetry that reinforced orientalist notions of Japaneseness. Haiku became an intrinsic component of *nihonjinron* discourse that reinforced essentialist notions of Japanese sensibility and the exceptionality of the Japanese poetic experience.

### Haiku and *nihonjinron* in Mexican literature

Catapulted by modernism and its desirous quest for novelty, *nihonjinron* found an eager audience in Mexican literary circles fascinated with the exotic. Discussions of unique Japanese spirituality and superior Asian ethics would fuel the idealization of this far Eastern country, its culture and, consequently, its literature. The introduction of haiku in Mexican literature by José Juan Tablada (1871-1945) would reinforce the mystic and esoteric notions of Japanese poetry propagated by such discourse. Today the mere mention of haiku automatically evokes associations with Zen Buddhism and Japanese unique artistic sensibility. This discourse can be traced back in large part to the writings of the famous Japanese theologian Daisetsu Suzuki (1914-1982). Known for igniting interest in Zen Buddhism in the West, in his famous book *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959) Suzuki attempts to formulate an intimate relationship between Zen and all Japanese culture explaining that “Zen has entered internally into every phase of the cultural life of the people” (21). In his discussions on Japanese poetry, Suzuki equates the composition of haiku with spiritual enlightenment known as *Satori* in Zen religious doctrine. The Buddhist theologian is quick to point out the superior spiritual faculties he believes to be unique to the Japanese people. He insists that haiku is in fact a spiritual

exercise that is only achievable for the intuitive Japanese mentality:

We can see also that haiku is a poetic form possible only for the Japanese mind and the Japanese Language, to the development of which Zen has contributed its respectable quota. (253)

However, Suzuki’s theories on Japanese spiritual exceptionality have been fiercely criticized by scholars that point out his essentialist tendencies and have, in effect, labeled him a “Zen nationalist” . Exhaustive studies on Suzuki’s Zen discourse like Donald López’s *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, and Robert Sharf’s “Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited” have emphatically rebuked Suzuki’s theory of an underlying bond between the entirety of Japanese culture and Zen and consider his thesis a construct of the Meiji period nationalist discourse.

In spite of the questionable legitimacy of the relationship between Zen and all Japanese culture as proposed by Suzuki, idealized notions of Zen and Japanese spirituality propagated in Mexican literary circles have fascinated even the most prestigious writers, among which include Octavio Paz. After a diplomatic stay in Japan in 1952, Paz became intrigued with Buddhism and its influence on Japanese esthetics. This period coincided with the New Age religiosity popularized from the 1950’s and the consequential myriad of English language publications about Buddhism that would markedly impact the perception of Zen in Western societies. Such titles as *Zen* by Sogen Arashin (1954) and *The Spirit of Zen* by Alan Watts (1958) would fuel the growing interest shared in many Western societies for “exotic” notions of spirituality. However, Suzuki’s *Zen and Japanese Culture* would be among the most influential references on Buddhism, and Zen in particular, in the West. The Japanese writer’s essentialist notions of Buddhism would undoubtedly penetrate Mexican literary circles and exert influence among the most prolific writers. In his extensive writings on Japan, the prominent Mexican writer Octavio Paz, an ardent reader of Suzuki,

appears to sympathize with many of essential discussions proposed by the Japanese theologian. In *El signo y el garabato* [The Sign and the Scribble] Paz reveals his idealization of Buddhism: “this sentiment of universal sympathy for all that exists, fraternity with the impermanence of mankind, animals and plants, is the best of what Buddhism has given us” (1973: 119).<sup>1</sup> In addition, in his translation of Basho’s masterpiece entitled *Sendas de Oku* [Oku no hosomichi], Paz reiterates Suzuki’s thesis regarding the influence that Zen has exerted on Japanese esthetics claiming that, “the attitude of Zen has influenced all of the arts, from painting and poetry to theater and life itself (1957: 16). However, this affinity with Suzuki’s generalization of Zen and Japanese esthetics is not coincidental. In “Octavio Paz and Japanese Culture”, Hervé-Pierre Lambert explains that the Mexican poet’s conceptualization of haiku originates in the writings of the Japanese theologian.

Paz’s Zen conception as an essential element of Japanese aesthetics owes much to Suzuki’s writings. Paz belongs to a generation for whom Suzuki’s conception is now considered as an ideological vision of Zen-related nationalism of the Meiji, extrapolating the idea of a Zen influence on all Japanese culture (2014: 29).

In spite of the numerous studies that emphatically rebuke the idealized concepts of Zen influence on Japanese Culture as proposed by Suzuki, discussions that underline essentialist relationships between haiku and Zen continue to predominate in Mexican literary circles. For example, in the previously mentioned interview, the celebrated Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco appears to repeat Suzuki’s thesis on the spirituality of haiku:

Meditating is destroying little by little the “I” and the illusion that it generates, and in this way haiku is presented to us as an active and

poetic form of meditation, through which we may achieve the enlightenment that leads to Nirvana, the mystic experience to which poetry allows us a glimpse (Pérez, 2019).

In the same vein, in her analysis of the work of the Peruvian poet José Watanabe, the Mexican critic, Tania Favela Bustillo, refers to Suzuki in order to establish an essentialist relationship between Watanabe, whose father was a Japanese immigrant, Zen and haiku (2018: 111-112). If anything, these examples shed light on the magnitude of the impact that Suzuki’s writings have had on contemporary discourse, and more importantly illustrate the deeply rooted orientalism that has conditioned perceptions of Japan in Mexican literary circles.

### Basho, Zen and the “spirit” of haiku

Western discourse on haiku invariably makes reference to the Japanese haiku poet Basho Matsuo (1644-1694) and his reconceptualization of the poetic genre during the Edo Period (1603-1867). Although in Japanese literary traditions his innovative theories were eclipsed by later poets like Buson Yosa (1716-1784) and Shiki Masaoka (1867-1902), Basho has to this day remained a prominent figure in contemporary discourse on haiku poetry. As it is well known, although Basho demonstrated interest in Zen and at one point even took private instruction from the Zen priest Butcho, he was never ordained as a Zen monk, nor did he have an official affiliation with a particular sect. However, many of the discussions on Basho in Mexican literary circles focus on the thesis propagated by Suzuki that establishes an intrinsic relationship between Basho’s haiku and the teachings of Zen Buddhism.

For example, in his writings on haiku Octavio Paz appears to reiterate Suzuki’s thesis when he claims that Basho sanctified haiku poetry with his Buddhist religiosity: “Basho’s haiku opens up to us the doors of satori: feelings and lack of feeling, life and death, coexist (1974: 134); and also when he declares that “for Basho poetry is a path

towards a type of instantaneous beatitude” , and in another occasion he proclaims that “Basho converted these ingenious esthetic exercises into spiritual experiences” (1973:118-119).

However, for other scholars the relationship that Suzuki so emphatically embraces between Basho, haiku and Zen teachings is not so evident. R.H. Blythe (1898-1964), the distinguished British Japanologist, seems to contradict this notion when he exclaims:

What was it that made Basho suddenly realise that poetry is not beauty, as in waka, or morality, as in doka, or intellectuality and verbal wit as in haikai? Some say it was the result of his study of Zen, but this seems to me very unlikely. Basho does not seem to have urged his disciples to do zazen, and seldom speaks about Zen and its relation to haiku (1971: 110).

In *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen*, Aitken (1978) also rebukes this propagated discourse that professes an exaggerated relationship between the poet and the teachings of Zen:

However, we do not seem to find him recommending zazen to anyone, even as an adjunct to the writing of poetry. He wore the robes of a Zen Buddhist monk, but this was no more than a convention of haiku poets of his period. It would be clearly wrong to claim Basho as a Zen poet in the sense that George Herbert was a Christian poet. (1972: xvii).

This notion of haiku “spirituality” would be a potent factor in discussions on José Juan Tablada and his introduction of haiku into Mexican literature. The Mexican poet would ultimately be associated with *nihonjinron* and his figure “orientalized” as someone with exceptional “Japanese” sensibilities. Tablada, in fact, did not compose haiku, but haiku-

like poems that he coined “sintético” [synthetic] poetry. The poet himself explains: “*Poemas sintéticos* [Synthetic Poems], as is *Disociaciones líricas* [Lyric Disassociations], are collections of poems that are styled like the Japanese hokku or haikai (2000: 105). However, much of the discourse about Tablada by literary critics is saturated with hyperbolic and abstract language that exoticizes his figure and artistic works. In her book *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano* [Orientalism in Hispanic American Modernism], Araceli Tinajero states that:

Tablada, like the haiku poet, touches the soul of animals and plants and who, by his Shintoist or Buddhist cultural heritage, feels a profound sympathy for all living things, a universal compassion. (2004: 43).

In the same vein, Juan Velasco, in his prologue to Tablada’s *Tres Libros* [Three Books], replicates this orientalist discourse:

In reality, behind the apparent simplicity of the bestiary of his synthetic poems, what is projected is the miracle of the revelation of a universal order refined in the teachings of Zen (2000: 13).

On the other hand, given that, in accordance with *nihonjinron* discourse, no foreigner would be capable of possessing the profound sensibilities characteristic of Japanese haiku poets, the literary quality of Tablada’s haiku can only be explained by orientalizing the Mexican poet. For example, Seiko Ota, in her book *José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japonesismo* [José Juan Tablada: his haiku and his Japanism], seems to suggest that the profound introspection of Tablada is the result of his innate “Japaneseness” :

Tablada composed haiku raising his eyes towards the sky and observing plants. We could say that he had known the world of haikus before

ever starting to compose them (2008: 62).

And another occasion Ota attempts to explain the Mexican poet's sensibility toward the "spirit of haiku" as the result of the environment in which he was raised: "Since childhood Tablada lived among animals, mostly insects, a fact that also constitutes an important factor in his approach to the spirit of haiku" (46).

In addition, Edgar Pérez Reyes attempts to establish a connection between the the Mexican poet and the "spirit" of haiku through an intertextual reference to *María* by Jorge Isaacs in his analysis of Tablada's poem "Mariposa nocturna" [Nocturnal Butterfly]:

Why was Tablada interested in making reference to *María*? The intertextual wink is a homage to the habitat in which the poet started composing haiku directly inspired by communication with nature: Colombia. Let's not forget that the Mexican poet conceived the book in landscape of Bogota whose splendor provoked in him the identification with Japanese landscapes seen twenty years prior. In this way Jorge Isaacs' *María* is converted in an intertextual reference that signs the geographical coordinates that cultivated in Tablada the haiku spirit. (2020: 191).

As demonstrated above, the idea of a "spirit" that marries haiku with Zen Buddhism and a unique sensibility towards nature and animals is consistently repeated in discourse on the essence of this Japanese poetry. These theories are constructed on the premise that there exists a coherent essence that characterizes all haiku throughout its five-hundred-year history. However, these assumptions ignore the vast diversity that composes the multitudinous schools of haiku poetry that have emerged since its conception. Although there have been, in fact, poets like Basho whose personal aestheticism enriched to a large extent his poetic

creations, it is objectively difficult to generalize about a "spirit" that unifies the long history of this poetic genre.

### The Conceptual Diversity of Haiku

As noted above, Western discussions on haiku, more often than not, center on the notion of a "spirit" or essence that serves as a cohesive bond for all haiku poetry regardless of the literary period or historical era of this poetic genre. This discourse ignores the great diversity of schools and poets that have characterized haiku throughout its long history which dates back to the fourteenth century. A brief review of the historical development of haiku should shed light on its conceptual diversity as well as the diverse schools that have emerged since its conception, and bring to the surface the extreme difficulty in claiming that this poetic genre can be defined according to single philosophy or conceptual notion. As it is well known, haiku, which originally meant "comical", originated as a parlor game consisting of poems composed of 17 syllables (5-7-5) and characterized for its use of seasonal references (*kigo*) and indicator of juxtaposed images (*kireji*). However, conformity to these conventions has largely varied according to the school and the poet. Although haiku was first popularized during the Muromachi Period (1333-1568), it was not until the publication of *Enoku-shu*, during the Edo Period (1600-1868), that this concise poetry forged a prominent place in the Japanese literary tradition. Known as *Teimon Haikai*, the haiku of this period was characterized by references to classical literary works and whose knowledge of the classics was a prerequisite to be considered a *Hai-jin*, or haiku poet. Towards the end of the seventeenth century a new school of haiku appeared called *Danrin* which advocated for poetry which portrayed everyday scenes of city-dwellers in language less restricted by literary formalities. The notorious Basho originally belonged to this poetic movement but later developed his own school. Distancing himself from previous haiku schools, Basho advocated for a more colloquial style which portrayed subjective emotions evoked when experiencing a phenomenon in nature. However, this school was eclipsed by Buson Yosa

who established the *Tenmeicho* school that promoted a return of haiku to its classic roots. At the end of the eighteenth-century Issa Kobayashi (1763-1828), who belonged to the *Kaseicho* school, promoted a new poetic concept which identified with everyday scenes depicted in subjective language, often with humoristic overtones. The eighteenth-century brought Shiki Masaoka who categorically criticized Basho and labelled his descriptions of subjective mental states and emotions as superficial. Being influenced by Western realism, Shiki advocated for objective depictions of nature. Finally, contemporary haiku poetry has witnessed an intense diversification which includes such poets as Sumio Mori (1919-2010), whose works primarily deal with marital love and everyday scenes in modern society, Ryuta Iida (1929-2007), who portrayed scenes of nature in abstract and symbolic language. Modern day haiku has been transformed into a type of hobby, often practiced in cultural clubs for retirees and haiku competitions for primary school students. In his book *Haiku-shi* (The History of Haiku), Riichi Kuriyama attests to the difficulty in delimiting the definition of haiku: "having been transformed through its long history by so many people it is impossible to give an unequivocal definition of haiku" (2000: 8). And in the same vein, Masaru Akamatsu, in his *Haiku Shi Taiyo* (Compendium of Haiku), claims that: "since its conception the only constant characteristic of haiku is its 5-7-5 syllabic rhythm (2011: 18).

## Conclusion

As discussed above, contemporary discourse on haiku prevalent in Mexican literary and academic circles is not, in many cases, based on objective analysis of the literary and historic development of this Japanese poetry, but is rooted in essentialist concepts that reinforce positive stereotypes and erroneous orientalist notions. Western discussions, more often than not, overlook the extreme diversity of the Japanese haiku and underline those aspects and elements that most satisfy *nihonjinron* discourse. Any notion that equates haiku with a particular literary current or proclaims that a specific poet embodies a haiku

"spirit" ignores the heterogeneity that has constantly transformed this poetic genre throughout its five-hundred-year history. Kenneth Yasuda (1957) sums it up brilliantly: "haiku, far from being an esoteric, purely Japanese form, incomprehensible to the West, shares common ground with all art in an important and significant manner" (1957: XiX).

## Notes

1. All Spanish texts have been translated by the author.

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