ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present and demonstrate various concepts of new nature as portrayed in modern Japanese tanka and haiku poetry. I attempt to demonstrate that even man-made objects surrounding humanity in modern times can play a role very similar to traditional natural elements in poetry. They can help express the feelings of poets, reflect perceptions of today’s world and enable readers to comprehend various aspects of life.

KEYWORDS: tanka, haiku, new nature, urban poetry, modernization of Japan

Introduction

What is nature? How are poets affected by the environment that surrounds them? What does nature look like in present-day towns and cities, and how successful are modern Japanese poets in reading it and writing about it? These are just a few questions that come to mind when thinking about the gradual transformation that Japanese traditional poetry has undergone for approximately the last 130 years. The purpose of this paper is to examine various possible forms and meanings of new nature representation in modern Japanese tanka and haiku poetry.

There is first a need to define the term nature. When attempting to grasp this term, a variety of definitions arise. Webster’s dictionary defines it, for example, as “the material world, esp. as surrounding man and existing independently of his activities”, “the natural world as it exists without man or his civilization”, or “the elements of the natural world, as mountains, trees, animals, rivers, etc.” (Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language 1996), while the online dictionary by

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Merriam-Webster, among other possible definitions, provides an interpretation as “the external world in its entirety”, or simply “natural scenery” (Merriam-Webster, online). *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, in comparison, views *nature* as “all the plants, animals and things that exist in the universe that are not made by people” (OALD, online).

The main reason why I think it essential to revise the term *nature* in modern times is the fact that the majority of people in developed countries spend most of their time in towns and cities, surrounded by objects which have very little in common with the traditional concept of *nature*. Understanding the concept of *nature* in the traditional way (as OALD puts it) would make us realize the grim fact that nowadays, in many modern cities, there is actually hardly any *nature* at all. Given such conditions, *nature in the city* would almost be an oxymoron. However, as nature in the old, traditional concept has always been a great, inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists all over the world, including, of course, Japanese poetry, I believe that the current look and shape of towns and cities might have a very similar impact on present-day poets as nature used to have in the past. I believe that even a city, seemingly unpoetic and unlyrical, can be acceptable as a nature-like source of inspiration provided that it is treated as such: including the reflection of the seasons, cyclical rhythms, the stimulating urban environment, objects and phenomena awakening emotions, etc. This realization has led me to re-define the key term, which is why I have decided to introduce the term *new nature* in a broader meaning.

People of the modern era live and exist inside cities full of buildings and roads, cars and heavy machinery in the streets, etc. For many of them, however, these elements of the city are nothing but objects surrounding them, a kind of setting, and not necessarily the core of their lives (unless they are, for example, construction workers or bus drivers). This is why I decided to also include in the revised definition these originally man-made objects (which of course do not exist “naturally”), creating a background or a setting to our lives. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I understand the term *nature*, or more precisely *new nature*, in a slightly broader sense, as follows: “the external world, consisting of plants, animals, things and phenomena, surrounding human beings in their everyday lives, including objects both existing on their own, and those made by people, either within or outside towns and cities.” Simply put, everything that surrounds us.
One might want to ask: What then does nature mean to a poet? What does nature in poetry mean to a reader? Nature is the fundamental characteristic and the most obvious tie between both Japanese old and modern poetry. Nature plays a key role in Japanese poetry, as it very often means much more than merely the scenery itself. Nature serves as an inspiration for poets, helping them awaken and stimulate their emotions. Nature helps them cope with and express their feelings and their thoughts on life and nature reflects the world in which they live.

The concept of nature captured in Japanese poetry of the traditional genres tanka and haiku was more or less in accordance with the OALD definition cited above up until the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the situation in Japanese poetry of the modern period (dating from Meiji era, 1868–1912) is not completely the same as it used to be in the pre-modern era, or even earlier. If one compares haiku poetry by Matsuo Bashō, Kobayashi Issa and Yosa Busson with poems in the same form by Masaoka Shiki, Takahama Kyoshi and Kawahigashi Hekigotō, it is apparent that they differ a great deal in objects and the image of nature captured in them, but are very similar in terms of poetic attitude toward their surroundings. One might also conclude this in the case of tanka poetry: from Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, Ariwara no Narihira and Ono no Komachi, to Yosano Akiko to Kaneko Tōta and Tawara Machi—one sees, reads and senses emotions and feelings of the same intensity and sincerity, just wrapped in slightly different scenes and vocabulary. This leads me to believe that the poetry composed by the great old masters and that by modern poets actually has much in common. The main link between them is the interest in depicting and reflecting the beauty of nature, and use of various natural motifs as symbols to express the poet’s emotions and feelings.

What is quite different is the shape or look of nature in the modern period. Many people composing and publishing tanka and haiku these days, unlike those of previous centuries, spend most of their lives in crowded towns and cities full of technological devices. Due to massive urbanization, which in the case of Japan began in the late 19th century, people moved to cities, leaving behind the countryside with all its so praised, beautiful nature. Gradually, a number of people have, unfortunately, become slightly less sensitive and perceptive to various natural phenomena. Over the course of time, however, poets living in cities have learned to recognize a new kind of nature surrounding them. Although the urban setting is not what one usually understands as poetical or lyrical, one might be surprised at how much poetic inspiration the city provides. And owing to poets, it is also possible for readers to sense the poetic character of the city.
In the lines that follow, the main focus is on various kinds of *new nature* representation. A classification of the analysed poems into four categories is also introduced, based on the ways I read or decode the possible message of the selected poems: a) a clash between elements of *old* and *new nature*, b) a city represented as a living organism, c) an account of today’s world, and finally d) order in chaos. I will support my ideas by quoting example poems to illustrate each category.

**Old Nature Meets New Nature**

In the late 19th century, due to general modernization and industrialization, the Japanese countryside was crossed by railroads, bridges and tunnels. It was not only the countryside which was affected by major changes. Due to massive urbanization, typical Japanese towns were gradually transformed from a backward pre-modern area into developed cities with Western-style brick buildings, factories, steel structures, and progressive means of transport; this soon began to be reflected in literature, including poetry. There are consequently a large number of poems in Japanese poetry combining objects from the traditional countryside (*old nature*) and items of the modern world (*new nature*) that have appeared in Japan since the Meiji period. A case in point may be the following poem by Masaoka Shiki:

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釜車道の一すぢ長し冬木立 (Masaoka 2002: 31)
‘A single long track
Of the railroad,
A winter’s grove’
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This combination of an old image of Japan (here represented by “grove”) and a new one (here “railroad”) is very frequent in Meiji-period poetry, when the appearance of innovations was quite frequent. The decades when railways were being introduced in Japan witnessed a huge increase in poetry depicting railroads, steam locomotives, and trains, among other things. These, together with bridges, tunnels, and railway stations, are definitely the most common examples of the role of *new nature* outside towns and cities. Gradual changes in Japan’s appearance were much more apparent, however, in cities. Leaving behind the previous setting, and at the same time following the leading idea of Shiki’s term *shasei*, or sketches from
Thus urban poetry emerged, which is now an integral part of Japanese poetry. Even within urban poetry several subcategories of poems, according to their specific thematic orientation, can be identified. Moving to the early 20th century, poems reflecting the industrialization of Japan are increasingly frequent, therefore suggesting a subcategory of industrial poetry. A good example of this sub-genre can be found in the poetry of Nishimura Yōkichi:

夕おそく、佇みてをれど
対岸の、
工場の音はやまざりしかも。 (Gendai kashū, 50)

‘Late in the evening, I am standing still,
But on the opposite bank
The sound of the factory will not cease’

The author captures the pulsating industrial zone, which helps push the country’s economy forward. The upper and lower parts of this tanka (kami no ku and shimo no ku) provide a remarkable contrast between a seemingly peaceful night and the undying rhythm of the factory. What is more, to present an even more impressive image of the scenery in front of his eyes, Nishimura also emphasized the scene by a very specific, noteworthy and rather untraditional line arrangement, accentuating the idea of two river banks alongside a river.

In Meiji- and Taishō-period (1912–1926) poetry, the combination of old nature and new nature is quite frequent in cases when the author is trying to draw the reader’s attention to a surprising, new, somewhat rare and still unusual object or phenomenon in the countryside that catches the viewer’s eye. Poetry at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, in contrast, provides many more examples of poems in which neither the poet nor the reader are surprised by what they can see. Much more often we receive the first impression that the image captured in the poem is nothing but a description of present-day nature, as in the poems below:

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2 That is the aim to depict what the poet can see and feel, in the most realistic way (see Beichman 2002).
Muramatsu Toshiko:
常ならば早苗のゆるる田の面にソーラーパネル音なく光る
(*Gendai Man’yōshū* 2015, 150)

‘On the surface of a paddy field,
Where sprouts of rice shake,
Solar panels shine,
Without making any noise’

Gotō Yōko:
黒ぐろとソーラーパネルの並ぶ屋根雹の白粒跳びはねており
(*Gendai Man’yōshū* 2014, 126)

‘Roofs covered
With black solar panels,
White hailstones hop up and down’

Sometimes, *old nature* disappears, and the scenery is completely taken over by *new nature*, as in the following example by Ariga Chieko:

ソーラーパネル空港際に並び立つ大きな電力集めんとして
(*Gendai Man’yōshū* 2015, 320)

‘Solar panels situated
Next to the airport,
Gathering a large amount of energy’

Some of these poems may, and very likely do, carry a much deeper message. Some can be taken as pure descriptions of scenery, while others can undoubtedly be read in a slightly more critical way. While it is definitely beneficial to use solar energy, not all of these poets seem happy about the current shape of the countryside, although one very rarely finds poems explicitly expressing harsh criticism and dislike of this state or situation. As Zdenka Švarcová (2012) points out, haiku (and I believe that this is valid for tanka as well) is poetry which almost lacks any negative emotions. If one, however, reads between the lines, a certain displeasure might be decoded in some of these poems. A seemingly neutral utterance may suggest, for example, regret about the evanescence and loss of the world as we used to know it in the past.
Occasionally, one finds poems reflecting *new nature* in a way which expresses the author’s disagreement with the gradual development and transformation of scenery. This is evident, for example, in the 1916 poem by Nishimura Yōkichi:

はてもなき、家家の海、
春の日の,
この東京のなんといふ汚なさ！ *(Gendai kashū, 51)*

‘Endless sea of houses,
On a spring day,
This Tokyo dirt!’

The upper verse (*kami no ku*) with the metaphor “sea of houses” (*ieie no umi*) gives an impression of an almost lyrical scenery. In the lower verse (*shimo no ku*), however, the author expresses how disgusted he feels (which is stressed even by the exclamation mark) about the current shape and look of Japan’s metropolis caused by the ongoing modernization. This creates a dramatic and surprising twist in the message of the poem, which is so typical of tanka poetry.

One might also notice additional similarities with the original concept of nature, among other things, the cyclicality of nature—traditionally the changing of the seasons, the rotation of dawn-daylight-dusk-night, or the circle of life. In the city poems I have analysed, I have found examples expressing the cyclicality on a 24-hour basis. They mostly show the rhythm of the day copying office hours, or the beginning of nightlife, as in the following example poem by Takei Yasuko:

東京の街の午後五時林立のビルうつりゐる川より暮るる
*(Gendai Man’yōshū 2015, 313)*

‘Tokyo at five o’clock in the afternoon
It grows dark from the river,
Reflecting the bristle of the buildings’

Generally speaking, it is not unusual to see day cycles which are *not* determined by the sunset or sunrise, but rather by the neon lights shining in the night streets. A different type of cycle (year cycles) can be traced, for example, by the changing fashion of clothes in shop-windows. Needless to say, the latter version is more common in the case of poems by women.
Tawara Machi, in contrast, offers an example of a poem set in spring, but completely denying the natural cyclicity of seasons:

| 咲くことも       | ‘The winds of spring       |
| 散ることもなく  | Blow at the telephone pole |
| 天に向く        | They bear no blossoms,     |
| 電信柱に吹く     | Have no petals to scatter, |
| 春の風          | And point up to heaven.    |

(3) (Tawara 1988, 52)

This, I believe, is another suitable example of expressing the reality of new nature. Whereas several hundred years ago the wind would very likely be blowing through the blossoms of a beautiful sakura or plum tree, reminding the observer of the spring season, here it is the absence of a key element of the traditionally spring scene that makes us recall what the real spring used to look like.

**The City as a Living Organism**

Apart from describing the city, Japanese poets also tend to reflect upon the ongoing massive and perhaps unstoppable development of cities. In urban poetry, a great deal of attention is paid to buildings, construction works, roads and bridges, cars and various other machinery, traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, etc. All of these items together form a “body” or an “organism”, which is the city. One receives an image of a personified city and personified objects in it as if the poet described a living creature. The “bodies” of cities are literally “growing”, as they keep spreading to further areas, “swallowing” smaller towns and villages, and “growing up” with numerous newly-built skyscrapers. In these cases, poems reflecting modern cities, without mentioning any people, are not rare at all. The following poem by Tawara Machi is an apposite example of such a city personification:

| タクシーの河の流れの | ‘Pedestrian-crossing       |
| 午前二時          | Sleeping undisturbed in    |
| 眠り続ける        | An endless river           |
| 横断歩道          | Of rushing taxicabs        |

At two in the morning… (Tawara 1988, 46)

3 English translation by Jack Stamm.
4 English translation by Jack Stamm.
The city, fairly lively and full of people and cars rushing through the streets by day, is quite different late at night: there are no pedestrians in sight (thus the pedestrian-crossings can be “sleeping undisturbed”), while the only movement is provided by taxis probably transporting passengers from place to place (perhaps from and to clubs and bars, and back home)—i.e. people enjoying the nightlife that is not evident outside. The only apparent activity is the one of the “river of taxicabs” in streets—just like blood flowing through the veins of a body sleeping quietly. Further developments are also quite often captured by the presence of a crane in poems. This huge device, which helps the city spread to areas farther away, is also very frequently included in personification, as if the city were stretching its arms, trying to reach high up to the skies, or pointing to a remote place—as in the following example by Asahi Toshiko:

休日の埠頭にクレーンは腕高く伸ばして冬の空を指しをり (Gendai Man’yōshū 2001, 414)

‘A wharf on a day off,
A crane is stretching its arm high,
Pointing to the winter skies’

Nonetheless, it should be emphasized here that personification is by no means a new thing in Japanese poetry. Traditional haiku poems provide a number of examples when e.g. a mountain “sleeps”, “gets dressed”, etc. Examples from modern poetry, such as the one cited above, once again show the transformation of the objects captured in them. Mountains might be substituted by skyscrapers, rivers by streets, trees by telephone poles, while all of these could seem to become “alive” at a certain moment.

An Account of Today’s World and Society
Poetic reflections on the daily use objects surrounding us offers, apart from other findings, a surprising and seemingly unpoetic view of contemporary society, because the place where we live influences the way we live. Things that we mostly perceive as absolutely common, ordinary, unexceptional, and almost take for granted, might not necessarily draw our attention. A poet, in contrast, is endowed with a much more observant and attentive eye, and notices things that we are very likely to overlook and ignore.
When one moves further on to the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the remarks on the current way of life may serve to make us realize how
much our lives differ from those that people lived not just centuries, but only decades ago. This change has been aptly expressed in poems by the two following women poets.

Harada Natsuko:
エレベーター・エスカレーター・動き歩道歩け歩けは昔とな
りて
(Gendai Man’yōshū 2015, 141)

‘Elevators, escalators, moving pavements
“Walk! Walk!”
Seems to be a thing of the past’

Takahashi Michiko:
あれこれの機器のボタンを押すくらしこの簡便の母になかり
し
(Gendai Man’yōshū 2001, 314)

‘Push the button
On a machine here and there,
My mother never had such an easy life’

Instead of admiring the pathos of an old tea kettle, for example, the poets notice other ordinary objects that are a common part of their lives. These items catch their eye, the poets pause for a while, and observing them, they realize something deeper about the life they (or we) are living. And the message delivered to the reader is often startling. This is again, however, a very traditional approach to Japanese poetry. A haiku should, among other things, contain a certain surprising element, which should arise from a sudden new realization, surprise, emotion (Tanayama 1996, 30), and should provide a fresh and original perspective. There is also a similar rule in tanka poetry—the shimo no ku usually offers a twisted meaning to the kami no ku, or develops it in a way that was not really expected.

**Order in Chaos**

A fresh new look at modern cities is provided by poems in which poets observe their surroundings from a distance, from a remote vantage point or from above. The poet draws our attention to the lines of streets (sometimes resembling rivers), the green areas of city parks and flowerbeds,
skyscrapers towering up in the distance like mountains, etc. Looking at the city from a distance and becoming aware of how complicated, diverse and tangled the modern habitat of humans is, can help or make us comprehend what tiny creatures in this huge universe we actually are. This enables us to find beauty (the beauty of nature) even in places unexpected. A remarkable view of a modernizing urban area (again highlighted by a special verse arrangement) has been captured in this 1934 poem by Watanabe Junzō:

近代的工場地帯は区劃整然と
運河あり
鉄道あり
クレインは高く。 (Gendai kashū, 242)

‘Modern factory zone systematically divided,
There is a canal,
There is a railroad,
A crane reaching high.’

Observing the industrial zone from a slightly remote place enables us to perceive it as a systematically arranged complex. Passing through this area, crossing a canal, or walking beneath a crane would probably not give us the same impression of the place. The following two examples bring us back to the compulsion to seek and find nature even inside a city. One would not normally expect that a person spending long hours working in an office of a high-rise building would all of sudden be tempted to express their nature-inspired feelings, as in the next two poems.

Hashimoto Miyoko:
ファクシミリ紫雲英田一枚送りたし (Gendai shikashū, 71)

‘A field of lotus flowers,
I’d love to send
A sheet of them by fax’

Motoda Tetsuyo:
四十階に見おろしをれば街中の鶴見川おだし秋深みつつ
(Gendai Man’yōshū 2001, 49)
'I look down from the 40\textsuperscript{th} floor,  
Tsurumi-gawa flowing through the city centre,  
Deep autumn'

Watching the rush of the streets from an upper floor of a high-rise building enables us to ignore the rush, noise, or pollution—i.e. the chaos of the city, which disappears in this perspective. These higher and larger units seem to bring peace and order into the chaos of everyday life. It is, thus, a curious paradox that getting further away from the city surrounding us can actually bring us closer to the nature inside the city. The distance helps us see what normally remains unseen, if we are absorbed by and in the city. From above, the chaos of the hectic city can finally seem to have settled and have a certain order.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the concept of new nature, as defined above, in modern Japanese poetry, and has shown that new nature has a very similar (if not the same) validity as old nature traditionally captured and included in Japanese poetry of the classical to pre-modern periods. In my opinion, there is a special “added value” in new nature poetry. Not only does it enable us to admire and enjoy the look of charming scenery inside modern cities, it can also contain and deliver additional information and impressions of what is “behind” the captured items and images. Thus, even the modern city with various modern technological objects and buildings can provide poets with a great deal of nature-like inspiration.

To quote Brower and Miner, “the scene described is usually nature, but a nature which is symbolic of man—a human experience of beauty, transience, loss, salvation, and so on.” (Brower and Miner 1957, 526) From my point of view, extending the definition of nature onto the objects of the modern, man-made world can help us realize a great deal not only about the current look of nature, but also—and even more—about ourselves. In the same way the old, great masters did not merely describe what literally surrounded them but also reflected in their poems the transience of being, human fate, emotions toward another person, or the cyclicality of the world and the universe. Modern poets, on the other hand, are able to notice the rush of life in contemporary society, the unbelievably rapid changes in lifestyles, a gradual loss of old nature, or even the tininess of a human being within the huge, pulsating body of a modern city and of the modern world.
No matter how much new nature differs from what used to inspire the
great masters of the past, the city contains and offers a great deal of poetic
potential, and all the poet has to do is: Stop – look – feel it. If and when this
is done, we realize that not only do we have a city in poetry, we can also
find poetry in a city.

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