

Essays

Going to Gengorō: Senryu Dichotomies

by Michael Dylan Welch

“Haiku see both forest and trees, senryu often can’t see either because of the preoccupation with people and things.”

—Howard S. Levy, 100 Senryu Selections, 1979

In 2003, Hokuseido Press published *Distant Frogs: Selected Senryu by Gengorō*, translated by the Aogiri Group, edited by Fukabori Shige and Taylor Mignon. The book’s nine sections contain 140 poems at one per page, most of which are illustrated by Miyagawa Yoriko. Gengorō is the pen name for Tobe Yoshirō, who was born in 1930 in Saitama prefecture. In his introduction, Bitō Sanryū announces that this book is “the first time that a single senryu poet’s works have been translated” from Japanese (xii), as opposed to senryu by multiple Japanese authors appearing in anthologies. Consequently, this landmark book gives Western readers a more substantial view of a single Japanese poet’s senryu than had ever been the case before.¹

But of course, the age-old question remains regarding the distinction between haiku and senryu, and Gengorō’s book offers a sustained look at the genre to help answer that question. In his preface, Taylor Mignon quotes Kawakami Santaro, who said that “the content of haiku is *exclusively* nature, while in senryu the themes and subject matter are as extensive as the objects and phenomena in the world” (xvi). So, we immediately see contentiousness in this definition, because most emphatically haiku are not exclusively nature, which seems an absurd claim to make when there are thousands of poems by the haiku masters over hundreds of years that refute this. Think of Buson’s decidedly human-focused poem about stepping on his dead wife’s comb and feeling the chill of

¹ I am accepting “senryu” as an Anglicized word, without the technically correct macron of “senryū.”

autumn, or Issa's "snow melting . . . / the village is flooded / with children." The only way to accept Kawakami's claim is to presume that humans are part of nature, but in that case, there would seem to be no distinction between haiku and senryu at all. And yet there is. In any case, nature is not necessarily even the goal for haiku; rather, the goal is seasonal reference, which of course incorporates nature a great deal of the time, but some seasonal references are purely human in their focus, as with those found in the "humanity" and "observances" sections of every *saijiki*, or season-word almanac used for the composition of traditional haiku in Japanese. Mignon notes that "Gengorō often views scenes and events objectively with the facts and enough of a scene for us to make our own conclusions" (xviii), which of course is true of haiku too. And we see the same blurred distinction between haiku and senryu in the book's opening poem, from which the book takes its title (2):

distant frogs
stop croaking
guests come

We may feel a touch of amusement here, where the frogs stop their croaking at the arrival of guests—presumably guests for a nearby human event, rather than metaphorical "guests" to the pond itself, although it could be both. Or are the guests so loud (is that what the poem is making fun of?) that even the frog's go quiet? The poem could therefore be said to have the humour we often see in senryu. But the poem also has earmarks of haiku: Frogs indicate spring, so we have a seasonal reference (plus an unavoidable allusion to Bashō). The poem has two parts, with a cut/pause after the second line (the third line is grammatically independent, at least in the English). And the poem seems to celebrate rather than skewer or make fun of its frog subjects, though perhaps it's gently skewering the implied loudness of human partygoers.

So, are even Gengorō's title poem and all the book's other poems closer to haiku or to senryu? Well, clearly senryu, because they're named as such. The poet has also been deeply involved with

senryu organizations in Japan. He identifies himself as a senryu poet, so we have no choice but to understand that the poems in the book are senryu. And yet, aside from the label they've been given, what can we learn from these poems themselves regarding what *senryu* supposedly is, considering the output of a practicing and well-respected Japanese senryu poet? As Bitō says in the introduction, “Senryu poems are being composed as a traditional literary art in a similar manner as tanka and haiku” (vi), which further raises the question of senryu as a literary art versus popular pastime or jokey exchange. We have much to explore here, and much to uncover regarding Gengorō's role in the senryu art.

I shall have to disappoint at the outset by saying that I won't have a definitive answer to the question of what distinguishes haiku and senryu, at least based on Gengorō. However, we do know that both haiku and senryu are considered social arts in Japan. As has been written elsewhere, one is considered a haiku poet or senryu poet simply by whether one is a member of a haiku club or a senryu club, and whether a given poem is shared at a haiku meeting or a senryu meeting. Consequently, the distinction rests not so much on one's poems but on the contexts of the poems. The West is different. In assessing haiku and senryu in English, for me a key distinction is one of tone. Specifically, haiku tend to celebrate their subjects (even if dark), whereas senryu tend to have a “victim” (even if the victim is only gently chided) and may or may not be humorous. Haiku typically treat their subjects reverently, whereas senryu do so irreverently. Where haiku might be said to inflate their subjects, senryu tend to deflate them. Haiku try to make a feeling, and senryu try to make a point. And if haiku is a finger pointing to the moon, senryu is often a finger poking you in the ribs. Yet such attempts at definition are ultimately just opinion and we may do better to look at the poems for guidance. With Gengorō's text as our petri dish, we can attempt to see what bacteria or penicillin they show us under the microbial umbrella of “senryu.” If not a definitive answer to the distinction between haiku and senryu, what I can offer here is a detailed analysis of various dichotomies that can be said to distinguish haiku and senryu to see where the poems fall. Of course, no conclusions can be reached if one disagrees with the dichotomies I propose, and there may well be more, but they may at least offer a point of departure.

The haiku/senryu dichotomies I propose are as follows, with the first option of each pair leaning towards haiku, the second more towards senryu:

1. **S/H** Serious vs. humourous (including the satirical and ironic)
2. **N/H** Nature vs. human (assuming humans are not part of nature)
3. **S/N** Seasonal vs. nonseasonal
4. **C/N** Having a cut (two parts) vs. not (often equivalent to having a *kireji*/cutting word or not) (assessing only the English translation for having two parts)

In some of these dichotomies, the distinction is admittedly subjective, such as deciding whether the poem is serious or humourous. Regarding the “distant frogs” poem already quoted, I’ve said it has a feeling of amusement to it, but whether it’s considered humourous is perhaps personal. Haiku and senryu are, by their very nature, deeply personal, which is why some of them can resonate so deeply with some readers, whereas others do not—with different readers responding to different poems. In any event, the following table indicates whether each poem possesses primarily one trait or the other, or sometimes both (especially with the nature/human dichotomy). The book has nine sections, but I indicate just the page number for each poem, along with my assessment for each of the dichotomies. Many of Gengorō’s poems also include seasonal references, and I indicate most of these in the Notes column of the following table, along with other observations. Seasonal categorizations are per William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World* season word almanac (New York: Kodansha America, 1996) and Gabi Greve’s World Kigo Database (<https://databaseworldkigo.blogspot.com/>). In Makoto Ueda’s senryu book, *Light Verse from the Floating World: An Anthology of Premodern Japanese Senryu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), a twenty-five page section titled “Let Us Laugh with the Seasons” makes it clear that it is perfectly acceptable for senryu to have seasonal references, but where haiku traditionally require such references, they are not required in senryu and are therefore seemingly incidental—but are noted here as a means to explore the possible dichotomies thoroughly. The data itself may not mean a great deal without each poem for reference,

but I hope the aggregation of this data will prove helpful to assessing the characteristics and variety of senryu as a thriving genre of Japanese poetry, with at least one Japanese poet serving as our guide.

But first, as examples of how I've interpreted poems using the dichotomies I propose, let's look at the following three poems:

sticking to the ceiling
a gecko is eavesdropping
on our conversation (5)

I find this to be a little more humorous than serious, but this raises the question of where and how the humour is perceived. The poem itself is purely factual, so one might say that it's "serious." But we *interpret* those facts in a humorous way because eavesdropping easily implies the overhearing of gossip. And while the gecko is listening, it still sticks to the ceiling, which suggests that it *wants* to hear the gossip rather than dash away, and the creature may serve as a metaphor for human listeners who sometimes wish they were flies on the wall—or geckos on the ceiling. Even if the content of the conversation is not gossip but more somber, the way the poem depicts the gecko as "eavesdropping" suggests a humorous intent. It is also clear that we have both nature and human content in the poem. The poem may be considered nonseasonal because, to my knowledge, "gecko" is not a season word, or at least not a common one. And yet this uncertainty suggests how subjective the classifications in the following table may be. Finally, the translation does not have a clear cut, or it's the very slightest of pauses at most—not a true cut where parts of the poem are grammatically independent (for example, in the book's title poem, a definite grammatical cut occurs after the second line: "distant frogs / stop croaking / guests come").

what a bummer
an old friend drops by
after quitting the bottle (63)

I doubt there would be much debate among readers that this poem is a senryu. It's humorous, it has a human focus (and no nature content), and it's nonseasonal, all of which push the poem more

there's always more to each poem than poking it with a stick.

Here, then, are my interpretations of haiku/senryu dichotomies present in Gengorō's 140 poems in *Distant Frogs*:

Pg.	S	H	N	H	S	N	C	N	Notes
2	•		•	•	•		•		Frog indicates spring
3		•?	•	•		•		•	
4		•		•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
5		•?	•	•		•		•?	
6		•?	•	•		•?	•?		
7		•?	•	?	•			•	Grasshopper indicates autumn
8		•	?	•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
9	•		•		•		•		Spring (named); would seem to be a haiku
10	•		•	•	•		•		Spring (named); would seem to be a haiku
11	•		•	•		•	•		
12	•		•	•	•		•		Summer feel (sun through leaves on lovers)
13	•		•	•	•		•		
14	•		•	•		•	•		
15		•?	•	•		•	•?		
16		•	?	•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
17	•		•	•		•	•		
18	•		•		•			•?	Sunflowers going to seed indicates autumn; no human content except anthropomorphism
19	•		•	?	•		•		Summer (named)
20	•		•		•			•	Haryester's moon indicates autumn; would seem to be a haiku
24		•	•			•	•		Parody of Bashō's "old pond" poem.
25	•	?		•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
26	•			•		•	•		
27	•		•	•	•			•?	Clover in bloom indicates spring
28	•			•		•	•		
29		•		•		•	•		
30		•		•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
31		•		•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
32		•		•		•	•?		
33	•		•	•		•		•	Strongly a senryu
34		•?	•	•		•		•	
35		•?		•		•	•		
36		•		•		•?	•		Tourist buses indicate summer; strongly a senryu
37		•		•		•	•		Strongly a senryu; didactic
38		•	•	•	•			•	Harvest moon indicates autumn, but the poem is about its absence
39	•		•			•		•	
42	•		•	?	•			•	Whitebait indicates early spring
43		•	•	•	•		•		Cats in love indicates early spring
44	•		•	•	•			•?	Caterpillar indicates summer
45	•		•	•	•		•		Spraying pesticides suggests summer
46	•		•		•		•		Snail indicates summer
47	•		•	•	•			•?	Frog indicates spring
48	•		•	•?	•			•	Damselfly indicates summer
49		•?	•		•			•	Water spider (presumable water strider) indicates summer
50	•		•		•			•	Mosquito larva indicates summer
51		•?	•			•		•	More of an aphorism
52	•		•			•		•	
56		•?		•		•		•	
57	•			•	•		•		
58		•		•		•?		•?	Strongly a senryu

Pg.	S	H	N	H	S	N	C	N	Notes
59		●		●		●		●	Strongly a senryu
60		●		●		●?		●?	Strongly a senryu
61	●?			●		●		●	More of an aphorism
62		●		●		●		●	Strongly a senryu
63		●		●	●		●		Strongly a senryu
64	●		●			●		●	Pumpkin indicates autumn; how can this not be a haiku?
65	●			●		●?		●?	Seems too serious/analytical for a senryu
66		●		●		●		●	Strongly a senryu
67	●			●		●	●		Strongly a senryu; however, this is pretty obscure/unclear
68	●			●		●	●?		
69	●			●	●		●		Century's end indicates the new year season; seems a senryu, but is too serious
72		●		●		●	●		
73	●?			●		●	●		
74	●?			●		●		●?	
75	●			●		●		●	
76	●?			●		●	●		Poem unclear
77		●		●		●		●	Strongly a senryu
78	●			●		●	●		
79	●		●?	●		●		●	See note about "daikon" on p. 162
80	●?			●		●	●		Poem unclear
81	●			●		●		●	So what?
82		●?		●		●		●	
83	●			●		●		●	
86	●?			●	●			●	New Year indicates the New Year season
87	●			●		●		●	
88	●			●	●			●	Poem unclear; what does "skinship" mean?
89	●			●	●		●		New Year indicates the New Year season; what does "samo samo sky" mean?
90	●			●	●?		●		New Year (implied) indicates the New Year season (the one-handedness, with the other hand holding an umbrella, might be considered humorous)
91	●			●	●			●	New Year indicates the New Year season
92	●			●	●			●	New Year indicates the New Year season
93	●			●		●?	●		New Year (implied) indicates the New Year season
94		●?		●		●		●	New Year (implied) indicates the New Year season
95		●?		●		●	●		Humorous one, but not necessarily funny
96		●		●		●		●	One needs to know that "shin" means "new" (although that's somewhat clear)
100		●?		●		●		●	
101		●?		●		●		●?	
102	●?			●		●		●	Context seems unclear
103	●			●		●		●	The illustration gives a vastly different interpretation than the translation by itself, suggesting that the translation may be missing something
104	●			●		●	●?		
105		●		●		●		●	One needs to know what "diet" refers to
106		●?		●		●		●	One needs to know what "cabinet" refers to
107		●?		●		●		●	
108		●?	●	●	●			●	Morning glory indicates early autumn
109		●		●		●		●	
110		●		●		●		●	
111	●			●		●		●	
112		●?		●		●		●	
113	●			●		●		●?	

Pg.	S	H	N	H	S	N	C	N	Notes
114	●?		●	●		●		●	One needs to know what "wairaidake" are "a kind of mushroom said to inspire laughter when eaten" (162)
115		●		●		●		●	
116		●		●		●		●	
117	●?			●		●	●?		
120	●			●		●		●	
121		●?		●		●		●	
122		●?	●	●	●			●	Sakura (cherry blossoms) indicates spring
123	●			●		●		●	Abstract
124		●		●		●		●	
125	●			●	●			●	April 1st indicates spring in Japan
126	●			●		●		●	Unusual syntax; readers must transpose the syntax to resolve it
127		●?		●		●		●	
128	●			●		●	●	●	
129	●			●		●		●	
130		●?		●		●	●	●	
131	●			●		●		●	
132	●		●	●	●		●		October indicates autumn; poem unclear
133	●			●		●	●	●	
134	●			●		●	●	●	
135		●		●		●		●	
136		●		●		●	●	●	
137		●		●		●		●	
138	●		●	●	●		●	●	Typhoon indicates mid autumn
139	●		●	●		●		●	
142	●			●		●		●	
143	●			●		●	●		Feels vague/incomplete (needs more of a context)
144		●		●	●			●	Father's Day indicates summer
145	●			●		●		●	
146		●		●		●	●	●	
147	●			●		●		●	
148	●			●		●	●?		
149	●		●	●		●		●	
150				●		●		●	
151		●?		●		●		●	
152		●		●		●	●		
153	●?			●		●		●	Feels vague/unclear (perhaps too personal?)
154		●?		●		●	●		
155		●?		●	●			●	Holidays may indicate "Golden Week" (spring) or perhaps "New Year"
156	●			●		●	●		
157	●			●		●		●	
158	●			●		●		●	
159		●?	●	●		●		●	
160	●			●		●		●	

The preceding data may be summarized as follows (the question mark indicates instances where the trait seems uncertain, the dot more definite):

Type	S	H	N	H	S	N	C	N
?	10	27	3	4	1	6	7	11
●	70	29	42	124	35	98	44	77
TOTAL	80	56	45	128	36	104	51	88

Let me unpack these numbers. Regarding the serious vs. humour-

rous dichotomy, a surprising number of the poems seem to be serious—80 out of 140 (57.1 percent). This may be in keeping with Gengorō’s reputation as a “literary” senryu poet, as opposed to a more “popular” senryu poet who might rely more exclusively on jokes, satire, and irony in entertaining his or her readers. In the nature vs. human dichotomy, a significant number of the poems include nature references, but these are often in conjunction with (not instead of) human references. We can therefore learn that senryu we write in English need not avoid nature content to go with human content—and note, too, that a handful of Gengorō’s poems have no human content, such as “upstream stones / get round as / they go down” (139), yet we cannot help but interpret this image symbolically, with the poem telling us that, as humans, our rough edges are worn away as we tumble through the river of life. In this case, then, the human applicability is implied. A striking but expected high number of the poems (128 out of 140, or 91.4 percent) include human references, underscoring this trait as a hallmark of senryu, whereas having only 56 out of 140 poems be humorous suggests that humour is not necessarily such a hallmark for senryu—at least with Gengorō as our sample poet. His humour is relaxed, though, so perhaps even the poems deemed as “serious” still have a lightness to them, an everyday accessibility that helps us see ourselves with increased awareness. In the seasonal vs. nonseasonal dichotomy, we might expect 104 of the poems to have nonseasonal content (74.3 percent), but as mentioned in the earlier reference to Ueda, seasonal content in senryu may be considered incidental (neither to be aimed at or avoided). And in the dichotomy of having a cut in the poem vs. not (again, considering only the English translations), 51 out of the 140 poems (36.4 percent) have a cut, whereas 88 of 140 do not have a cut (62.9 percent; the percentages do not add up to 100 percent because of uncertainties in some poems).

Some Western haiku poets have said that if a poem has human content then it must be a senryu, but this does not account for many haiku by the Japanese masters with human references. Conversely, many of those same Westerners have assumed that

humorous and nonseasonal content makes the poem a senryu, but we can see from Gengorō's work that this is an oversimplification. Where we can draw less of a conclusion is regarding the presence of a cut. Traditional haiku often include a *kireji*, but senryu do not, yet may still have a two-part structure (even if not often). Because I'm assessing only the English translations here, the results are less definitive, because preserving or creating a two-part structure may be a result of the translation process, possibly independent of how the original poem is structured. Yet still the observance of a two-part structure in more than a third of Gengorō's senryu translations suggests that a senryu does not need to *avoid* having two parts.

I also note that, of the 140 poems in *Distant Frogs*, thirteen have titles. In his preface, Taylor Mignon says that "Several liberties were taken [in the translations]," adding that "Sometimes a more shapely form is offered by breaking the lines in different ways, other times titles were attached when natural" (xxii). So, we cannot be sure to ascribe the titles to the poet, nor should we assume that they are typically allowed in senryu—in fact, my sense is that they are practically never used in senryu, and seem to be added here by the translator in every case. However, I do note that, as with haiku, senryu do sometimes use headnotes, but they function differently from titles, often providing a narrative context or a geographical setting, whereas a title might impose a judgment on the poem, summarize its theme, or direct or deliberately misdirect the reader's attention. An example poem with a title is as follows (where the original Japanese does not have a title) (3):

The Welcome

a palm-sized
parakeet
takes the name card

The name card, of course, is a *meishi*, or business card, hence the appropriateness of a "welcome" context, when meeting someone for the first time. We might interpret the "parakeet" to be a metaphor

for a hand (palm-sized) that pecks away the proffered name card. It is difficult to believe that there's a literal parakeet in this experience.

Amid all this analysis, which puts thinking ahead of feeling, let me return to feeling by ending on the poems themselves. Here, without individual commentary, is a selection of favourites from Gengorō's *Distant Frogs*. You can compare the page references to my dichotomy assessments in the preceding table and decide for yourself if you agree with my categorizations, or you might simply choose to enjoy the poems as they parade by.

even the bulldog's eyes
dilate at perfume (8)

an old man & a cat
yawn each other out (16)

old pond
no frogs
jumping in (24)

even in
mountain inns
sea cuisine (29)

environmental
pollution inspectors'
cars spume exhaust (31)

tourist resort
the buses leave
only trash (36)

growing up without
the harvest moon
telekids (38)

obliged to buy
the sales woman
was well endowed (72)

in all photos
 a gorgeous guide
 is asked to join (77)

at shrines & temples
 one-handed worship
 pilgrimage in the rain (90)

first bow to the
 roadside god
 then take the photo (94)

until when will
 the new in shinkansen
 continew? (96)

pitching only
 the choice scenery
 tours are sold (109)

flirting with mannequins
 until the rain blows over (115)

the sliding door
 opens for
 losers too (124)

The Pedometer

on the way home
 lend it to the dog (135)

hey, what's up?
 shaking hands
 who is this guy? (136)

presented hair tonic
on father's day (144)

talked to her sleep-talking
not knowing 'til midway (146)

at death's edge
but not to be
to-be-continued hero (160)

We can see a pleasing and energizing range in these selections, employing slang, a title in one case, italics, minimalism, parody, irony, satire, wordplay, honesty, two-line constructions, invented words—whatever suits the needs of the translation—although the range may be that of the translators, who took liberties, noting in the preface that “Some might be tight and others freer rhythmically” (xxii). Regardless of whether the distinction between haiku and senryu ever becomes clear, or if it even needs to, we can enjoy Gengorō’s depiction of “the subtleties of humans in the world” (vi), as Bitō Sanryū puts it in the introduction, and see that “The works of Gengorō . . . grasp the subtleties of human feelings of modern society, and are full of light and natural humor” (xii). Ultimately, we can recognize that “Modern senryu has a common background to be shared across national borders” (xii) and see our own opportunities to contribute to the conversation of worldwide senryu.

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