

A Touch of Japanese Tradition

Greetings,

We hope this e-publication, **A TOUCH OF JAPANESE TRADITION**, will connect us with new friends and groups with interests in Japan. This Winter 2013 edition features three topics: Haiku (俳句), *Taiko* (太鼓), and the Japanese Zodiac system.

Richard Colignon writes about Matsuo Basho, the most famous haiku poet of Edo-period and his 150-day walking journey and his diary, *A Narrow Road to a Far Provence* (奥の細道). Dan Rosen's humorous essay "In a Word" captures the essence of haiku: minimalism with elegance. They are followed by haiku contributions from our members and friends. These authors include (in alphabetical order): Linda Austin, 玄廣, Wendy Feltham, Hisako Matsuo, and 白井愛代.

Shawn Bender and Kelsey Volkmann offer a fascinating history of taiko, art of Japanese drumming, and the development of St. Louis Osuwa Taiko. You learn about Grandmaster Daihachi Oguchi of Suwa Taiko who invented kumi-daiko, that is, taiko put in an orchestra form, after World War II. Oguchi came to St. Louis in 1986 and formed St. Louis Osuwa Taiko. Cultural exchanges between Suwa and St. Louis continue to thrive. If you missed a joint performance last year, you do not wish to miss another two-way show this summer during Japanese Festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

The last essay by Dave Lowry is about the Japanese Zodiac system, Junishi (十二支) & Eto (干支).

Japanese people send New Year's greeting cards featuring the animal of the year. This is the year of the snake. However, he tells us that it is not just the year of snake! For those of you who are born in the year of snake, you want to find out the elements of your sign. We look forward to receiving your contributions to our next edition of *A Touch of Japanese Tradition*. We also welcome your comments and suggestions about our programs and events.

Best Wishes,

Chikako Usui
President
Japan America Society of St. Louis

Dolores Krapfl
President
Japan America Society Women's Association

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俳句

横浜に汽笛の曳ける花の昼

春月を仰いで銀座四丁目

-by 臼井愛代 from 花の昼 (Itoyo Usui is the author of 花の昼, collection of haiku published in 2009.)

Wind is a condor

Plunging forward to nowhere

Screaming and screaming

-by Wendy Feltham (Wendy Feltham is a dedicated student of Japan and is a retired school principal. She composed this haiku when she was in 4th grade.)

The cat looks at me

Big round eyes so innocent

The vase knocked over

-by Linda Austin

Crescent moon so high

I hear my mother singing

An old lullaby

-by Linda Austin (She is the author of *Poems that Comes to Mind*, published in October 2012.)

平生 (へいぜい) の心の花が暮れに咲き

-by 玄廣 (Buddhist priest)

飛火野 (とびひの) の鹿も絵出の初詣

餌を蒔く老父見守る寒雀

-by Hisako Matsuo (She is Professor of Sociology at Saint Louis University.)

Autumn sky I see

shining in the bus window

two suns just as bright

-by Chris Born (He is a Ph. D. candidate in the East Asian Language and Culture Program at Washington University in St. Louis.)

Matsuo Basho (松尾芭蕉) and Haiku (俳句)

Richard A. Colignon

One of the most distinctive cultural expressions may be *haiku* poetry involving many elements that people have come to associate with “Japaneseness.” *Haiku* poetry involves the juxtaposition of two images or ideas, a structure consisting of 17 morae (similar to, but different from, syllables), and a seasonal reference.



Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). Source: <http://www.bashouan.com/psBashou.htm>

Source: <http://www.basyo.com/ogaki/map.html>

The most famous *haiku* poet of the Edo period is Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). He wrote numerous poems while on his 2,400 km, 5 month walking journey in 1689 and captured in his diary “A Narrow Road to a Far Provence” (奥の細道, *Oku no Hosomichi*). He departed from Fukagawa, Edo (Tokyo), headed north to Hiraizumi, then to the Sea of Japan coast, and concluded his journey in Ogaki, Gifu Prefecture. Basho is celebrated for his spare verse and mystical interpretations projecting human emotions and acute observations. Two poems, at the beginning and end of his journey may illustrate this genre.

**Loath to let spring go,
Birds cry, and even fishes'
Eyes are wet with tears**

**Sadly, I part from you,
Like a clam torn from its shell
I go, and autumn too**



Ogaki

These poems express Basho's style: simple, unpretentious, and refined observations of nature, projecting human emotions in metaphors to nature. Visitors to the Nagoya area of Japan may wish to stop by Ogaki, which celebrates the master poet with museums, statues, and the town's Basho Festival in November. It takes 30 minutes to Ogaki from Nagoya by JR train. For more information, contact: 大垣市奥の細道むすびの地記念館 (The Ogaki Memorial Museum of Oku-no-Hosomichi Destination Site) at: <http://www.city.ogaki.lg.jp/0000012751.html>

Dr. Richard A. Colignon is Chair and Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Saint Louis University.

In a Word

Dan Rosen

“Less is more,” wrote Mies van der Rohe.

“The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao,” said Lao Tzu, some 2,500 years earlier.

They keep trying to tell us, but we have a hard time listening or, rather, believing. Society teaches us otherwise. Expansive exposition is the epitome of erudition, we are instructed. So, we measure intellectualism by the pound.

Academics (including me) are among the worst. Good luck publishing a one- or two-page article in the Journal of anything. And if you do somehow beat the odds, don't expect colleagues or tenure committees to be impressed.

It's karmic justice: payback for all those responses of “at least . . . pages” to students who ask, “How long does the paper have to be?”

Basho and his buddies knew better. Looking deeper gets you farther than just looking around. That's what makes writing a good haiku difficult: devoting the time and energy to really paying attention, cutting out the clutter.

A Zen priest, in a story from long ago, was renowned for his beautiful garden. The Emperor sent word that he would like to see it for himself. On the appointed day, the Emperor arrived, only to find that all the flowers, save one, had been cut down. “How could you be so disrespectful,” he growled, “knowing that I was coming to visit?”

“To the contrary,” the priest said. “I searched for the most beautiful flower in the garden and removed the rest, so you could see it clearly.”

The 5-7-5 structure of orthodox haiku provides just enough space to write the garden and the one flower; gestalt in a teacup. But if 17 syllables are insightful, why not even fewer? Especially in English, which has a different orthography from Japanese.

Take the most venerable of all haiku. It could be stretched into 5-7-5 in English, but further reduction yields greater results:

**Old pond
Frog jumps in
Plop!**

Basho wouldn't mind, I'm quite sure. He might even give the *inkan* of approval to a haiku I wrote years ago, toddler in hand:

**My son, one
Ice cream cone
Chocolate nose**

Mark Twain is credited with saying, "If I'd had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter."

**More time
Shorter letters
Haiku too**

Dan Rosen is Professor of Law at Chuo University in Tokyo.

Editor's Note:

Basho's famous haiku, "old pond" is:

古池や蛙飛込む水の音
ふるいけやかわずとびこむみずのおと

This separates into *on* as:

fu-ru-i-ke ya (5)
ka-wa-zu to-bi-ko-mu (7)
mi-zu no o-to (5)

In English translation:

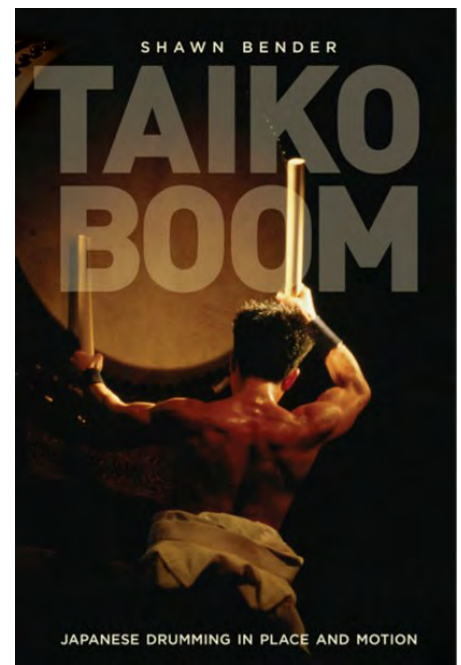
old pond . . .
a frog leaps in
water's sound

THE NEW SOUND OF JAPANESE DRUMMING

Shawn Bender

It's often one of the first images many people see before they visit Japan: the slopes of Mt. Fuji rising majestically in the background; a bullet train rocketing across the foreground. It was the image I saw before I first visited Japan two decades ago, and I have seen its symbolism expressed in various guises ever since. Whether it's a geisha ducking into McDonalds for lunch, an elderly farmer talking on a cellphone, or kimono-clad women clutching Hello Kitty purses, Japan is presented pictorially as a curious mix of the old and the new, the historical and the contemporary, the traditional and the hyper-modern.

It is true that one often sees these images, as I did, in travel advertisements. For this reason, it is safe to assume that they depict Japan not in the way it is but in the way we perhaps might want to see it—Japan as an exotic place where past and present co-exist yet remain recognizably distinct. But it is also true that this way of seeing Japan has come to extend more broadly beyond the realm of advertising imagery. It has become a way in which visitors imagine Japan and a lens through which Japanese have also come to see themselves.



Available for purchase at UC Press, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other online booksellers.

The pervasiveness of this perspective is all the more surprising when so many aspects of contemporary Japan do not fit within it. This is true in particular for ensemble taiko drumming, a subject I have been researching for over a decade. Taiko drum ensembles date to the 1950s, when the first groups placed the large, barrel-shaped *taiko* drums used for centuries in Japanese ritual and festivity at the center of exciting new stage performances. Since the 1980s, the number of taiko ensembles in Japan has risen exponentially, a phenomenon observers there have called the “taiko boom.” The considerable success of this new genre of performance could hardly have been predicted. Other music performed on “traditional” Japanese instruments has suffered for years from declining popular interest and a lack of willing inheritors, especially in comparison to the country’s insatiable appetite for fresh-faced pop idols and rock stars. What, then, accounts for taiko’s successful emergence and popular appeal?

In my book *Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion*, I argue that both the success and the distinctive performance style of taiko drumming derive from its connection to projects of community making. Taiko ensembles emerged in local communities out of attempts to harmonize inherited festival drum patterns with musical influences from both Japan and abroad. Early taiko ensembles did not aim at slavish imitation of tradition, but strove to create something that appealed to a more cosmopolitan public. The influential taiko group Osuwa Daiko, for example, modeled its arrangement of Japanese drums on the jazz drum set and orchestral percussion section. The openness to innovation and spirit of festivity characteristic of taiko groups resonated with communities convulsed by Japan's tumultuous postwar recovery and economic miracle. Recognizing how they could help foster residents' connections to rapidly evolving residential areas, local governments helped finance fledgling groups, in effect providing economic support for the wave of new ensembles to come.

In my view, then, taiko is a musical *and* social phenomenon, one that expresses the shifting organization and growing cosmopolitanism of Japanese communities. It is what I call a "new folk performing art," a genre that welcomes change and creativity while maintaining a close tie—in terms of membership, repertoire, and instrumentation—to folkloric expressions of community. That this genre mixes old and new motifs as well as foreign and local influences should come as no surprise, since engagement with a multitude of influences from near and far increasingly constitutes everyday experience in Japan. The character of taiko groups thus forces us to reconsider our image of Japan as a unique mix of the ancient and modern. "Old" instruments and "new" rhythms do not remain distinct in taiko; they are remixed and reassembled into a new and complete whole.

What's more, the postwar context in which taiko emerged continues to structure the practices of enthusiasts. As a localized, highly masculine, and physically demanding form of performance, taiko groups have come to reflect broader discourses of gender, place, and tradition at play in Japan. While women have made considerable inroads into a genre historically dominated by men, prevailing aesthetic standards continue to constrain the range of their expression. As some in the taiko community push for standardization of technique, others advocate adherence to idiosyncratic, local customs of oral transmission. And where some herald the novelty of contemporary taiko, others magnify the occasional case of conservation to present taiko as deeply rooted tradition. In these ways, and through its status as a symbol of Japan's cosmopolitanism and global appeal, the new genre of ensemble taiko drumming highlights the complications and contradictions of communal expression in Japan.

Dr. Shawn Bender is Assistant Professor of East Asian Studies at Dickinson College.

Road to Modern Taiko Runs from Suwa to St. Louis

Kelsey Volkmann



St. Louis – while 6,000 miles away from Japan – celebrates a direct tie to one of the fathers of modern taiko, the art of Japanese drumming. The Gateway to the West’s connection to the birth of modern taiko took center stage Sept. 27, 2012, when Dr. Shawn Bender, author of a new book, *Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion*, lectured at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Bender, an assistant professor of East Asian Studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., discussed what he called the three distinct genealogies of taiko: Osuwa Daiko, Sukeroku Taiko and Ondekoza.

Inventing ‘Kumi-Daiko’

Taiko, thunderous drums made out of tree trunks or barrels topped with animal hide, had been played for centuries at temples, shrines, festivals and by the military. Grandmaster Daihachi Oguchi of Osuwa Daiko was the first musician to transform taiko into a performance art played by an ensemble. “Oguchi and Osuwa Daiko really were the first to put taiko together and play them on stage, with different pitches, in an orchestral form,” Bender said in an interview.



Taiko scholar, Dr. Shawn Bender, left, shows Daihachi Oguchi, on the left in the photo, a jazz drummer who invented taiko ensemble playing

Oguchi was inspired to create “kumi-daiko,” or the taiko ensemble, in 1951 after deciphering an old scroll of taiko music found in Suwa in the Nagano Prefecture of Japan. Oguchi, a jazz drummer, “incorporated western rhythms that appear entirely indigenous,” making the roots of this “new folk art” just as American as it is Japanese, Bender said. Oguchi and his group, Osuwa Daiko, helped propel taiko to the international stage in 1964 when they played at the Tokyo Olympics. Taiko showcases breathtaking choreography, and the rhythms reverberate in audience members’ chests, giving it universal appeal. “Your heart is a taiko,” Oguchi once told The Associated Press. “All people have an internal taiko, and they listen to a taiko rhythm, dongsuku-dongsuku, in their mother’s womb. It’s instinct to be drawn to taiko drumming.”



Daihachi Oguchi performs in 1987 on the drums he donates to St. Louis Osuwa Taiko.

From Suwa to St. Louis

In 1986, Oguchi visited Suwa’s sister city, St. Louis, to form St. Louis Osuwa Taiko, which began as a children’s group. A year later, Oguchi donated drums to St. Louis Osuwa Taiko. Oguchi died in 2008, shortly before St. Louis Osuwa Taiko’s first trip to Japan, but his legacy lives on in taiko groups on both sides of the Pacific.



The original St. Louis Osuwa Taiko in 1987 started out as a children’s group.

More than a quarter century after Oguchi founded St. Louis Osuwa Taiko, the group has grown into an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization devoted to spreading and evolving the art of taiko through workshops and shows across the country, with the largest performance occurring every year on Labor Day weekend at the Japanese Festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

St. Louis Osuwa Taiko's repertoire blends both original pieces ([watch a video](#) about the group's newest original piece, "Oni-Daiko") and traditional ones composed by Oguchi, including "Hiryu Sandan Gaeshi." Taiko players across the globe, including St. Louis Osuwa Taiko, honored Oguchi's memory this summer by playing "Hiryu" and [posting videos](#) of their performances on the [Hiryu Project](#) website on the anniversary of his death. "Hiryu," which Oguchi wrote in 1972 based on rhythms from Osuwa Shrine, tells the story of a dragon god circling overhead as the drummers pray for the god to stay and give its blessings.



St. Louis Osuwa Taiko performs an original piece, "Tobihi," by Joe Kimura and Hiroshi Tanaka. It translates to "leaping fire."

'New Folk Art'

Osuwa Daiko, along with Sukeroku and Ondekoza, were at the forefront of what became a "new folk art" that represents the new kinds of communities that emerged since postwar Japan, Bender said. Sukeroku Taiko, the first taiko troupe in Tokyo, is the second limb of the taiko family tree Bender describes in his book. The group popularized flashy moves and a style of playing that uses slanted drum stands, which groups worldwide, including St. Louis Osuwa Taiko, have adopted.

The third arm of modern taiko stems from Ondekoza, which was based on Sado Island and served as the "world's ambassador of Japanese drumming," Bender said. The group's popular canon of songs, including "Odaiko," which features solos on the group's largest drum, has influenced taiko worldwide. Ondekoza "elevated" taiko to make it the "focal point of stage performance," Bender said during his talk.

"As a new genre, taiko is no longer attached to a particular local tradition, but is more a readymade, off-the-shelf folk art," Bender said in an interview. "It has the same costuming and the same drums, but the groups occupy an interesting position: They are new, flexible about participation, but yet they have a sort of feeling of oldness with their instrumentation and costumes. It's neither traditional nor new – it's new folk. It celebrates the present and how it makes them feel and how much joy they derive from it."

'St. Louis and Suwa Continue Taiko Ties'

To celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2011, St. Louis Osuwa Taiko hosted Osuwa Daiko for a joint show in St. Louis. To continue to strengthen those ties and celebrate a common founder in Oguchi, the two groups plan another two-way cultural exchange in 2013. Osuwa Daiko will visit St. Louis to perform alongside St. Louis Osuwa Taiko at next fall's Japanese Festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden. St. Louis Osuwa Taiko will then travel to Suwa later that month to study and perform in Japan. St. Louis Osuwa Taiko has launched a fundraising campaign with the goal of including as many group members as possible in this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"We continue to carry on Oguchi's tradition by playing his original songs, introducing taiko to new audiences and performing across the country as one of the only North American taiko groups left with 'Suwa' in our name," said Andrew Thalheimer, artistic director of St. Louis Osuwa Taiko. "Visiting Suwa in 2013 is the next step in our ongoing partnership with Osuwa Daiko and our sister city. We're really looking forward to it."

For more about St. Louis Osuwa Taiko and its classes for children, adults and seniors, visit stltaiko.com.

Kelsey Volkmann is a corporate communicator and freelance journalist and has performed with St. Louis Osuwa Taiko for three years.

IT'S NOT JUST THE YEAR OF THE SNAKE

Dave Lowry



Anyone who has read the placemats in a Chinese restaurant knows about what might be called the “Asian zodiac.” As they wait for their General Tso’s Chicken, they have scan the placemats and learn they were born in the Year of the Dog or Snake or Dragon. But the lunar calendar on which that zodiac is based is a lot more involved than what one learns from a restaurant placemat.

In Japan, the lunar calendar and its associated method of reckoning years was in use from 600 AD, when it was introduced from China. In 1872, after Japan opened to the West, it was replaced by the Gregorian calendar. The lunar sequence of years measured not only time. It was also associated with a variety of esoteric teachings, including Taoist cosmology, and mathematical computations that worked as a guide for government affairs, business decisions, military strategy, and one’s personal life.

The year in old Japan was divided into 12 lunar months (*junishi*), each named after an animal. It was further divided into cycles, each with major and minor variations (*eto*), equaling 10, named for the five Taoist elements. Combining *junishi* with *eto* creates a 60-year cycle. It gets more complicated: months have numerical and descriptive names and they are divided into 24 seasons, representing the movement of the sun by exactly 15 degrees of latitude.

The 12-year periods are also cyclical in what is expected in them in terms of the generation of cosmological forces and their eventual dissipation. The year of the Snake, for instance, is the “bottom” of the cycle, when elemental forces are at their ebb. That part of the cycle is even more pronounced this year because, using the *junishi-eto* method, 2013 is the Year of the Snake in the Lesser (*yin* or, in Japanese *in*) Water Element. Just to make it a little more complicated still, according to Taoist lore that was incorporated into Japanese traditions, water is associated with the color black.

The Year of the Horse begins a new cycle, so it is generally considered auspicious. That's why many traditional schools of tea, flower arranging, martial arts, and so on, will have special ceremonies this year, many with religious connotations linked directly to the junishi-eto calendar. Other years have their own attributes. The Year of the Boar is considered a propitious time to build. In 1504 the famous castle at Matsumoto in our sister state of Nagano was begun. In 1947, the Tokyo Tower was constructed; both were Years of the Boar in the lesser water element. The worst year for building is the Year of the Snake in the greater earth element. Not surprisingly, virtually no temple, castle, or other important building can be found that was built in one of these years.

Even "good" years can have negative attributes. One Horse Year during the time of Hideyoshi Toyotomi was a major fire element, absolutely the worst time to give birth to a female. Hideyoshi had to issue an edict forbidding parents from killing girl babies born that year for fear female infanticide would be so widespread it could affect the balance of the population in the future.

Unlike the Western zodiac and contrary to the information on those placemats, the "sign" under which one was born did not determine personality. Instead, one's actions were controlled and could be predicted by the junishi and eto of one's birth, combined with those of the present. Divining this was a fundamental part of the art of *kigaku*.

So 10 February isn't just this year's lunar new year in Japanese tradition. It is the beginning of the Year of the Black Snake in the Lesser Water Element.

Dave Lowry is a writer and a dedicated student of Japanese martial arts. He has published widely, from the Japanese traditional arts to food.

