



Japan in Albania: Cultural Crossings and Poetic Influence/ Receptions

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Abstract

Despite their geographical distance and cultural particularities, Japan and Albania reveal surprising affinities in poetic form and sensibility. Among these, the haiku emerges as a particularly potent medium of cross-cultural resonance. This paper traces the trajectory of haiku into Albanian literary culture, examining its arrival via indirect translations, its adaptation to local poetic frameworks, and its evolving reception from the mid-20th century onward. Focusing on the aesthetic, philosophical, and formal challenges posed by this genre, the study reveals how haiku's minimalist structure, seasonal symbolism, and meditative tone have influenced Albanian poetic expression—not as a dominant form, but as a latent aesthetic force. Drawing from Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception, the paper foregrounds the active role of Albanian poets and translators in reshaping the form within a new cultural context. Case studies and close readings illustrate how haiku principles subtly inform imagery, tone, and poetic perception in Albanian verse. Furthermore, the paper situates this reception within a broader transnational framework, comparing Albania's engagement with haiku to its reception in Western modernism, particularly in the works of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. Ultimately, the paper argues that haiku in Albanian literature represents more than literary borrowing; it reflects a shared poetic consciousness shaped by attentiveness to silence, nature, and existential nuance. In this sense, haiku functions less as a borrowed form and more as a translatable sensibility—demonstrating how distant poetic traditions can resonate deeply across cultural boundaries.

keywords: Albanian poetry, comparative literature, haiku, Japanese literature, literary influence

1. Introduction

At first glance, Japan may appear remote from Albania, both geographically and culturally. The two countries are separated by thousands of miles, radically different traditions, and linguistic systems with little in common. Yet, as literary history often demonstrates, physical distance does not preclude meaningful intellectual and aesthetic exchange.

Albanian interest in Japanese culture has a long, if discreet, tradition. As early as 1910, Albanian periodicals featured articles on Japanese society, including one on the status of Japanese women (Spahiu, 2022). This early curiosity - largely educational and ethnographic in tone - laid the groundwork for more sustained cultural encounters. In the latter half of the 20th century, Japanese literature began to find its way into Albanian publishing, often through intermediary languages such as Russian, French, or German (Alikaj, (n.d.)) and (Alikaj, 1961)¹. Today, the National Library of Albania holds over 200 titles related to Japanese literature. These include canonical figures such as Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata, Kenzaburō Ōe, and Haruki Murakami - each translated with varying levels of fidelity and reception.

Amid these literary imports, one poetic form—the haiku—emerges as a particularly resonant bridge between Albanian and Japanese literary cultures. Despite its compact size, haiku's philosophical and aesthetic density has opened unexpected paths of dialogue and influence/reception across continents. The concept of reception should be understood—following the perspective of Hans Robert Jauss—as an activity carried out by the recipient who, far from being a passive observer, plays a primary and active role in the process of communication. As Chevrel (2002, p. 66) notes, this view foregrounds the participatory function of the reader, thereby shifting the focus from the text as a static object to the dynamic interaction between the work and its audience.

1.1 Main Purpose of the Paper

To explore and analyse the influence/ reception of Japanese poetry—particularly the haiku form—on Albanian literature, revealing how this poetic tradition has impacted Albanian poetic sensibility despite the geographical, linguistic, and cultural distance between Japan and Albania.

1.2 Specific Objectives of the Paper

To examine the cultural and linguistic challenges involved in translating haiku into Albanian, particularly the tension between preserving the original form (e.g., 5-7-5 syllable structure) and conveying its philosophical and emotional depth.

To analyse the aesthetic and philosophical influence/reception of haiku on contemporary Albanian poetry, identifying traces of haiku's minimalist, imagistic, and contemplative qualities in works by Albanian poets. To situate this influence/ reception within a broader transnational context, comparing the reception and adaptation of haiku in Albanian literature with its impact on Western modernist poetry (e.g., Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens). To argue that haiku has not become a dominant form in Albanian literature, but rather a mode of perception or poetic awareness, influencing the tone, imagery, and emotional discipline of Albanian poetry in subtle but lasting ways. In essence, the paper aims to show that haiku's presence in Albanian letters represents not merely a borrowed form, but a deep aesthetic resonance, suggesting that meaningful cultural exchange can occur even across great distances—through poetic affinity rather than formal adoption.

¹ First translation: It is prior to 1945, but the exact year of publication is unknown. See: *Legjenda japoneze* / ed. and transl., from Italian by Rebi Alikaj. - Tiranë: Shtëpia Botonjese "Kristo Luarasi", [n.d.]. - 89 p.- Introduction, author: Alikaj, Rebi. See also: *Harabeli*. Përrallë popullore japoneze [*The Sparrow*, Japanese folk tale] / transl., Eqrem Biba. – Tiranë : Ndërmarrja Shtetërore e Botimeve, 1961, 17 p., with il. (Archival data from the National Library of Albania)

2. Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from comparative literature, translation studies, and cultural analysis to explore the presence and influence/ reception of Japanese haiku in Albanian literary discourse. The methodology consists of the following key components: The paper traces the historical trajectory of haiku's introduction into Albanian literature, identifying key translators, poets, and publications that facilitated its cultural transmission. Archival research, including reviews of publications in Albanian periodicals and national library holdings, informs this historical overview. Selected haiku translations and original Albanian poems are analysed closely to identify formal, thematic, and stylistic correspondences with traditional Japanese haiku. Comparative readings are used to reveal how Albanian poets have engaged with haiku aesthetics—either through direct imitation, thematic parallels, or philosophical resonance.

A transnational lens is applied to situate Albanian literary responses to haiku within a broader global pattern of haiku reception—particularly within Western modernist traditions. This comparative framework helps highlight the uniqueness and limitations of haiku's integration into Albanian poetics. Specific poets are presented as case studies to illustrate the range and depth of haiku's influence/ reception. Their works are analysed to uncover how elements of haiku (minimalism, seasonal awareness, emotional restraint) are adapted or reinterpreted in the Albanian context. By synthesizing these methods, the paper offers a nuanced understanding of how a distant poetic form like haiku can cross cultural boundaries and subtly reshape the literary imagination of another tradition. Haiku, a highly stylized and deeply embedded form of Japanese poetics, began its journey into Albanian letters primarily through translation. The form's brevity, structural rigidity, and reliance on seasonal imagery (*kigo*) make it a uniquely challenging vehicle for cross-cultural transmission. Yet several Albanian writers and translators—particularly in the late 20th century—took on this challenge with notable dedication. Three early figures stand out in this process:

1. Francesco Solano (Dushko Vetmo), an Arbëresh (italo-albanian) poet and intellectual, brought haiku into Albanian and direct study of Eastern traditions. His translations reflect not only linguistic skill but also a philosophical sensitivity to the meditative and existential undertones of haiku.
2. Shyqyri Nimani, a graphic designer and poet from Kosovo, compiled a collection of 184 translated haiku that circulated widely in the 1980s and 1990s² (*Haiku: poezi japoneze*, 1984). Nimani's visual sensibility arguably complemented haiku's pictorial quality, enhancing its reception in Albanian literary circles.
3. Petraq Kolevica, a major figure in Albania's cultural landscape, published a significant haiku collection in 1990 based on German-language sources. In addition to translations, he offered metapoetic commentary on the haiku form, suggesting that its democratic ethos stood in contrast to the aristocratic traditions of classical Japanese poetry, such as the *tanka*. (Kolevica, 1990, p. 10) metapoetic commentary on the haiku form, suggesting that its democratic ethos stood in contrast to the aristocratic traditions of classical Japanese poetry, such as the *tanka*. (Kolevica, 1990, p. 10)

These efforts were followed by a modest boom in haiku interest during the 1990s and early 2000s. Albanian writers began composing original haiku, often blending traditional seasonal and natural imagery with local concerns. Associations dedicated to haiku were founded, and

² *Haiku: poezi japoneze* (*Haiku: Japanese Poetry*; 1984) in Japanese and Albanian. The book was based on Daniel C. Buchanan's *One Hundred Famous Haiku* (1973).

anthologies emerged from both Albania and Kosovo. Yet, despite this apparent spread, haiku has remained marginal in the Albanian literary system—not canonized, but not forgotten.

The marginal status of haiku in Albanian literature may be understood not merely in terms of literary trends but also as a function of cultural translatability. Haiku operates within a tight matrix of form, imagery, and philosophical subtext. Its power lies not only in what is said, but in what is left unsaid—a silence filled with cultural resonance (Kolevica, 1990, p. 9).

Consider Bashō's iconic haiku:

The old pond

A frog jumps in—

The sound of water. (Basho, 2004, pp. 30, 34)

To an uninitiated reader, this may appear deceptively simple. However, within Japanese aesthetics, the frog signifies spring; the sound of water echoes themes of transience and renewal (Basho, 2004, pp. 8-9). The silence before and after the splash is as important as the splash itself. Translating this into Albanian (or any other language) often requires glosses or footnotes, which risk breaking the haiku's formal and emotional immediacy

A similar difficulty is present in the following haiku:

The first cold heavy shower

Even the monkey seems to love

A light garment of straw. (Basho, 2004, p. 34)

Here, the monkey is not just an animal but a seasonal symbol, and the straw coat represents a philosophical embrace of impermanence. These meanings are culturally coded and thus difficult to transplant fully into the Albanian context, where corresponding symbols may not exist or may hold different connotations (2004, 13).

Moreover, linguistic structure presents another barrier. The classical 5-7-5 syllable structure of haiku often cannot be preserved in Albanian without distortion. Albanian syntax and morphology, being more inflectional, makes the maintenance of such syllabic economy particularly demanding (Kolevica, 1990, p.10) Thus, translators often must choose between form and fidelity—between preserving structure or preserving spirit. Despite these challenges, haiku has left subtle, sometimes subterranean, traces in Albanian poetic practice. While few poets have adopted the form strictly, many have embraced its spirit: its minimalism, its attention to nature, and its cultivation of emotional restraint.

Consider this excerpt:

on the canvas of the air, with deliriums like Van Gogh's,

the fury of the old rain recurs after it starts:

we did not remove yet the old pigment of grief

from the heart. (Krasniqi, 2024, p. 79)

Though this is clearly not a haiku in structure, it reflects haiku's meditative compression and image-driven logic. The image of rain, like Bashō's water, becomes a portal into emotional memory and existential recurrence. Internationally, the influence/ reception of haiku on modernist poetry strengthens this argument. Ezra Pound's famous poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough. (The Heath Introduction to Poetry, 1988, pp. 15, 364)

It has long been considered the first “English-language haiku,” though it lacks strict syllabic form. It introduced haiku aesthetics into Anglo-American modernism, emphasizing brevity, juxtaposition, and image (Kennedy, 1987, p. 480).

Wallace Stevens’s *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* takes this further. Each stanza offers a discrete, imagistic fragment—a structure akin to a haiku sequence (The Heath Introduction to Poetry, 1988, p. 351-353). Stevens’s focus on perception, stillness, and seasonal movement parallels classical haiku concerns.

Among twenty snowy mountains,

The only moving thing

Was the eye of the blackbird. (The Heath Introduction to Poetry, 1988, p. 15, 351)

This comparative glance clarifies the mechanisms by which Albanian poetry negotiated the haiku’s aesthetic. A fascinating Albanian analogue is Sokol Zekaj’s *Thirteen Variations on a Sensibility*. One stanza reads:

Hidden in the old bush

With the new greenness

To a point not marked on the hunters’ maps

The rabbit falls in the sleep of the rabbit. (Krasniqi & Osja, 2019, p. 228)

Though again not formally haiku, the poem draws on its aesthetic logic: attention to unnoticed natural processes, suggestion over declaration, and existential quietude. Haiku, said Basho, is simply what is happening in this place at this moment (Kennedy, 1987, p. 486).

Likewise, Xhevdet Bajraj, in exile in Mexico, produced minimalist poems of haunting emotional clarity:

Nothing moves

except for loneliness

which continues to grow

and to oak that will serve as a coffin

This verse compresses a vast emotional register into a sparse natural image—yet another clear echo of haiku’s spiritual and aesthetic DNA.

A related sensibility can be found in the “poetry of sadness,” rooted in the aesthetic principle of *sabi*—originally meaning “the sadness of loneliness.” Or: “Loneliness.” The term suggests both sorrow and tranquility, a response to the realization and acceptance of the essential and shared loneliness of things. It can refer to an aspect of the fundamental nature of reality, a quality of a particular moment in nature, and the state of mind that apprehends and conforms to loneliness of the world. This term was a central spiritual-aesthetical ideal of Basho’s School (2004, p. 381).

This principle is exemplified in the work of Frederik Rreshpja, one of the most significant lyric poets in Albanian literature. As Petraq Kolevica (1990, p. 10) notes, true beauty must convey complex meaning through the simplest forms.

*Last summer I had a stick that became a willow in the old stream.
The birds will come, they will build nests
And we will no longer be lonely
My old hat.*

*Until the day of the hunters,
Cursed hunters! (Rreshpja, 2018, p. 16)*

Criticism regards this aesthetic principle as a central key to interpreting the work of this highly influential poet in contemporary Albanian literature (...).

The illustrative parallels between these two poetic worlds do not end here; however, the scope of this paper allows only limited space for further elaboration.

3. Conclusion

While haiku has not become a dominant poetic form in Albanian literature, it remains a quiet and persistent presence, shaping poetic thought more than poetic form. Its influence/ reception can be felt in moments of stillness, in the compression of imagery, in the occasional minimalist experiment. In many ways, haiku has functioned in Albanian literature not as a genre, but as a mode of awareness—a way of seeing the world, briefly, intensely, and with disciplined attention. The poets who have embraced it—whether through translation or original composition—have helped open Albanian letters to a broader spiritual and aesthetic horizon. Ultimately, haiku's presence in Albanian literature affirms a larger truth: that cultural forms can travel across vast distances and find new soil, not by imposition, but by resonance—by echoing something already latent in the receiving culture's poetic imagination.

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