
The spontaneous order of words: economics experiments in *haiku* and *renga*

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Abstract: The search is on for low cost collaborative learning models that foster creative cooperation and growth through spontaneous competition. I propose that a twist on the traditional *renga* competition can help. The prize-winning *Capitalistic Crisis*, composed by five undergraduate students at Roosevelt University, is an example of *renganomics* – a spontaneous, collaboratively written linked haiku poem about economics, inspired by *haiku economics* (Ziliak, 2011, 2009a) and classical Japanese *renga*. In medieval Japan *renga* gatherings were social, political, and economic exchanges – from small to elaborate parties – with a literary end: a completely unplanned, collectively written poem. Since their ancient and royal beginnings *renga* have been written competitively and by all social classes for stakes. So far as we know this is the first *renga* in English, or any language, to focus on economics. The paper concludes with economic haiku by a student and *renga* master in training.

Keywords: haiku economics; renganomics; creative cooperation; experiential learning; innovation prizes; Hayek; Bashō.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Ziliak, S.T. (xxxx) ‘The spontaneous order of words: economics experiments in *haiku* and *renga*’, *Int. J. Pluralism and Economics Education*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.000–000.

Biographical notes: Stephen T. Ziliak is a Professor of Economics at Roosevelt University. His pioneering work on ‘haiku economics’ has been featured in *Poetry*, *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. His most recent book is *The Cult of Statistical Significance* (with Deirdre McCloskey).

1 Introduction

(With *haiku* by Samuel Barbour and *renga* by Cathleen Vasquez, Joseph Molina, Jacob Lundquist, Cameron Simak, and Morgan Higgs)

Invisible hand;
mother of inflated hope,
mistress of despair!

In a survey of college students and faculty, Colander and McGoldrick (2009, p.31) discovered a large unmet demand for interactive, ‘big think’ activities in the core economics curriculum. Advocates for dialogue and pluralism are not surprised that students want more voice, more personal stake, in their economics education (Klamer et al., 2007). But some fear that there is not enough room or time for new activities in the already cramped economics curriculum, that the cost of eliminating the chapter on long run cost curves or whatever is too high [Salemi, (2009), p.102].

“Because contact hours, student study time, faculty preparation time, and educational technology are all scarce resources, instructors must regularly apply the benefit-cost principle to prospective topics, authors, and ideas.”
[Salemi, (2009), p.102]

One way forward is to identify low cost collaborative learning models that foster creative cooperation and growth through spontaneous competition. An example is hosting a *renga* competition for stakes.

2 The haiku-renga connection

A *renga* is in general a spontaneous, collaboratively written linked haiku poem with 31 syllables conventionally arranged in five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic order [Carter, (2011), p.1]. Each *renga* stanza is in other words a haiku followed by a couplet. “Linked verse, *renga*, was the most widely practiced literary genre in Japan throughout the medieval period (the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries)” [Horton, (1993), p.443]. In the economy of language, I have mentioned elsewhere, the haiku poet seeks to minimise the cost of effective communication or signalling: endowed with only 17 syllables, every colour, sound and image counts (Ziliak, 2011, 2009a). In the economy of *renga* it is the same except in *renga* there are multiple authors working together in a literal exchange system, exchanging words and symbols in a spontaneous order of chain linked rule-bound verse.

Traditionally *renga* stanzas could rise in number from 36 to 100 linked stanzas [Ueda, (1982), p.69]. An invited *renga* master would start the chain linked poem with a 5-7-5 stanza (*hokku*) and then he or she would pass the poem to the next poet (often a master or mistress in training), who would link to it with a 7-7 verse. The emergent, spontaneous order of words is often no sleeping dragon. A Nobel laureate, the poet Octavio Paz, deeply admired the *renga* form and rituals, and even arranged for a now famous week-long international *renga* on the left bank of Paris with three other poets representing different cultures and languages, in 1969. Paz and others imagined the spontaneous creations as a circle of decentralised exchange, a downplaying of ego, the whole world at work, producing one social thing, but with no single, particular thing or story or end in sight (Paz et al., 1969). Is this not economics? Makoto Ueda, a prominent student of Japanese literature, observed similarly that “The primary advantage of the *renku* [*renga*] as a verse form is that it is possible to attain a *scope* and *variety* that *ordinarily lie outside the capacity of a single poet*” [Ueda, (1970 [1982]), p.69; italics added].

Renga is the father and mother of all haiku. In medieval Japan the first stanza of a *renga* was supposed to be a complete poem by itself, written in the now familiar 5-7-5 form, called *hokku*. Haiku is the name that was eventually given (by Shiki) to the

17-syllable verse which stands alone, as a single flower, independent of other links and stanzas [Ueda, (1970 [1982]), pp.69–111].

Historically speaking *renga* gatherings were festive social, political, and economic exchanges – from small to elaborate parties – with a literary end: collectively written poems to provoke and entertain the assembled audience about a theme, mood, and season – economic seasons included. Since their ancient and royal beginnings amongst 8th century Japanese courtiers, these spontaneous orders of words have been written competitively and by all social classes for stakes [Yasuda, (1957 [1995]), p.124].

I report here on the first *renga* in economics, which took place during 45 minutes of one class period in April 2014. The winning entry of the first *renga* competition, *Capitalistic Crisis*, authored by five undergraduate students at Roosevelt University, is an example of what might be called *renganomics* – a spontaneous, collaboratively written linked haiku about economics, inspired by *haiku economics* (Ziliak, 2009b) and classical Japanese *renga*.

3 Economics in renga and the birth of renganomics

Like jazz improvisation, like surrealist painting, like the economics of the spontaneous order and the invisible hand, *renga* poems are unrehearsed, unplanned collaborative outputs, wherein each poet’s job is to react to what came before him (the stock, the input, the price) and then to add to, subtract from, redistribute, or otherwise alter the flow of the poem before turning it over to the next person in the chain. For example, in a famous *renga* called *The Summer Moon* [Bashō (1691) in Ueda (1970 [1982]), pp.106–111] one of the first exchanges between poets is:

Though the second weeding Is not yet over, rice plants Shoot out their ears.	(1st poet writes 5-7-5 in Japanese sound count)
Ashes are brushed off a dried sardine Just taken from the fire.	(2nd poet reacts with a 7-7 link)
Those who live in this area Have never seen a silver coin. What a wretched place!	(3rd poet continues with 5-7-5, etc.)

(Bashō and others, translated by Ueda (1982, p. 107))

As in *The Summer Moon*, above, economic observations were common in Japanese haiku (Ziliak, 2009a) and unsurprisingly in *renga* long before. [The roots of linked verse “are at least as old as Japanese recorded literature itself”, and 17 syllable stanzas have been traced to the late 8th century [Horton, (1993), p.444]. Haiku considered as a standalone verse begins with poems by Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), in the late 17th century.] Throughout Japanese literature, then, ancient and modern, one finds little snapshots of the economy. From the Ashikaga period (1336–1573) one of the 250 surviving *kyōgen* (or comic plays) is called *The Renga Thieves*. The play is about (wait for it) “poor but devoted *renga* enthusiasts who are driven to attempt a robbery to allow them to host a gathering” [Horton, (1993), pp.456–457]. *Renga* demand grew high enough in the Middle Ages for *renga* masters – Bashō, most notably – to make a living by travelling around Japan to lead – and to lend prestige to – local *renga* competitions.

A survey of *hokku* suggests that human economy was considered by many *renga* masters to be part of nature and season, and thus a worthy topic for the opening stanza. Thirty three of 320 or 10% of the *hokku* written by great *renga* masters and meriting translation by Carter (2011) refer to cycles, seasons, work, consumption, exchange, wealth, cost, storage, idleness, loss, gain, and other economic phenomena. This means that 1 in 10 *renga* began with some sort of observation about the economy or economic conditions. Chiun (1381–1459), a high-ranking samurai and one of Sōgi's *Seven Sages of Linked Verse*, began one *renga* with a comment on wealth distribution [Carter, (2011), pp.36–37]:

Ah, the capital!
at least one cherry tree
at every house.

From Sugiwarara (1421–1502), a noted Zen monk and poet, another *renga* began with a reference to food scarcity and competition ... from birds [Carter, (2011), pp.58–59]!

Birds cry out –
at those who pick blossoms
on the mountain path.

Renga could grow to 100 stanzas long. Thus, a survey of economic content in each stanza, and of additional *renga* beyond those translated by Carter, would reveal a different, probably larger, presence of the economy. For example, about one-third of Bashō's *The Summer Moon* refers to economic life. The novelty of *renganomics* is to give economic theory and science a master's seat at the *renga* table.

3.1 Preparing for *renganomics*: the night before

The evening before the first *renganomics* was to begin, I asked students to read an article published in this *journal*, on 'Haiku economics: little teaching aids for big economic pluralists' (Ziliak, 2009a), to put them in the haiku frame of mind. I showed them other examples of haiku economics written by other students, posted on my website, and I asked them to read a *haiku dialogue* I did with a journalist at the Chronicle of Higher Education (Ziliak, 2009b).¹ The dialogue would put them in a *renga* frame of mind, trading economic observations in haiku form. Finally, to give birth to the next morning's *renga*, I asked them to write for significant extra credit points up to five haiku about economics and the economy. They were encouraged to include references to a novel we read in class, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and to the textbook we used, Colander's *Microeconomics*. I told them that a competition would ensue the next morning in class but I did not say what kind of competition and for what stakes. Bring five copies of your haiku to class the next day. Five copies on paper. You will see.

3.2 Now it's game time, *renga* time

The students arrived with their five printed copies of five original verses of haiku economics. They are eager, excited, and curious. For the next five minutes of class I talk about *renga* and *renga* history. I do not mention that *renga* has all but disappeared for most of the past 350 years. [But see Paz et al. (1969) and Holman and Muske-Dukes (2011) for more evidence of its revival.] I announce the locale, the season, and the cash prize of 50 US dollars for the winning *renga* team.

3.3 *Renga locale*

Renga take place normally in “part of a larger, multipurpose structure. In either case, locale itself stood to influence the artistic tenor of the sequence and, by extension, of the written text” [Horton, (1993), p.448]. Our *renga* competition was held in a fourth floor classroom at Roosevelt University’s Auditorium Building, 430 S. Michigan Ave., a magnificent modernist limestone structure designed by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Dankmar Adler, in 1887. Our classroom seats 50, precisely our number. The walls are unadorned. But the square room has a high ceiling and large, wood framed windows affording generous views of Grant Park, Buckingham Fountain, world class museums, and Lake Michigan. Across the street there recently ended a ten-year long labour strike at a local hotel. It was our regular class period, 11:00 am to 12:15 pm, on a sunny but cold day in April 2014.

3.4 *Renga rules and attitude*

I grouped the students by seating location into teams of five (counting seats from left to right). Some traded places as spontaneous profit centres were formed. I told them that they are trying to make the haiku talk to each other, and to give their mates a copy of the five haiku they prepared. Their *renga* would address economic science and the economy itself, at minimum, but I encouraged them to explore bigger themes in the course, such as the ones discovered when we read Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. I showed them the following *uta* (the 5-7-5-7-7 form) which begins with a *haiku* I published at *Economist’s View* (Ziliak, 2013):

October sunset –
The debt crisis turned Boehner
Red-orange-and pink

The tea party has started
but we ran out of sugar.

Yes, *renga* can be sarcastic and provocative. *Renga* parties can get downright raucous, with and without the *sake*. Just stick to the economy, and to the 5-7-5-7-7 *uta* form, those were our main rules. After 12 years of teaching *haiku economics* I find that students are typically stimulated by this combination of rules and freedom, and especially in an economic class, where they do not normally expect to have so much freedom to express ideas and feelings. So too, here.

I nudged the *renga* writers to stay as close as possible to economics themes, to pay attention to the ‘season’ of the business cycle. Otherwise, do not worry if there is no single story that emerges. A single story is not the point. The best *renga* are left ambiguous, baggy, open to multiple interpretations. And do not worry about the dozens of rules and regulations recorded in *Shōhaku’s Renga Rulebook of 1501*, I said [Carter, (1983), pp.595–642]. Not at first, anyway.

Though most haiku poets have relaxed the old 5-7-5 rule, economists are more likely to retain it (Ziliak, 2011). The strict 5-7-5 form gives students a chance to make the most from little and at the same time balance a budget. The budget of words is called haiku economics. So keep the 5-7-5-7-7 form, keep the *uta*, I told them. The 31 sounds and no more of *renga* provide a discipline they might be lacking in the cost curve chapters. Most other rules were deliberately skipped over. No mention of the moon. No cherry blossoms.

I did not want to risk crushing their creative energies. Just be free to explore the economy.

Tradition does dictate that a *renga* master or mistress and scribe be invited or appointed to conduct and edit the whole. That was me, assisted by Samuel Barbour. (In medieval Japan, the master himself received handsome compensation in cash and in kind, sake and sushi included in with the kind.) Cathleen Vasquez was the *renga* mistress in charge of the winning team and Joseph Molina was appointed scribe. The students decided amongst themselves who would serve as master or mistress and scribe.

You will decide for yourself what to think about their novel result, *Capitalistic Crisis: Renganomics*, which was composed in a mere 45 minutes time. Take that, Google! Take that, Marcel Duchamp! Perhaps you will join others, in the spirit of Octavio Paz, and keep the poem going. Make it better, show them where they're wrong or boring. So far as we know this is the first spontaneous *renga* in English, or any language, to focus on economics.

On Samuel Barbour's haiku, in *Fashions of Economics*. Carlyle would smile. Keynes would straighten his posture. Bashō, who wrote about the rice economy in 17th century Japan, would touch his chin and continue on his journey to the narrow path of the interior, as Barbour is now going to the interior – and especially to the exterior – of economics. Have you read a better description of Alfred Marshall's demeanour? Of Krugman's beard, Volcker's cigar, or money illusion? Barbour learned to write haiku economics in economics courses he took with me at Roosevelt University. He is now a graduate student. Game on.

Capitalistic Crisis: Renganomics

Capitalism
An economic system
Where the rich stay rich!

With all the competition
Free markets cannot be free

The monopolies
Made from the nation's wealth
Microsoft systems

Today, look to the small man
He is struggling for money

The United States
And the debt crisis we face
Are ruining us.

But how can we get ahead?
World still has promise today

Economic growth
Includes major bull markets
A nationwide "BOOM"

Boom grows the walls on Wall Street
Obama's vision is clear

Speaking politics
Our system of freedoms is
Capitalistic

But sometimes our world crumbles
Will we be like Spain & Greece?

A ballooning debt
Causes a system downgrade
For a bleak future

Is the government guilty?
We must always look forward?

Ballooning debt and
Economic destruction-
Trump's scary vision

History repeats itself
This time it could be much worse

The government lies
It stands and watches us fall
Love the way you lie

Keeping up with the Jones's!
That is our way of life here

Goods are never free
In opportunity cost
All things have a price

It's about the stacks of cash
Money makes the world go round

Up prosperity
It's what we all want to do
Why wait another minute?

Times like this help us to grow
Help us predict the unknown

We've seen it before
We all know it has wrecked us-
The Great Recession

We are still underwater
How can we all stay afloat?

Swimming in our debt
We are prisoners to it-
Daily foreclosures

Wrong result repeats itself
Are we not builders?

Learning from mistakes?
We are destined to do this
Thank you, Obama.

Fashions of Economics: Haiku

I.

Finance and fashion
Go well together putting
models on catwalks.

II.

We are eminent
respectable men in suits
you've never heard of.

III.

What pure, white as snow
Bristled monument adorned-
Alfred Marshall's face.

IV.

In Eighty-Three we
shook off inflation like ash
from Volker's cigar

V.

Far more numerous
than the quantity supplied
soldiers marching feet.

VI.

Bring silver and gold!
They say the hangman's price is
quite inelastic.

VII.

J. P. Morgan's nose;
That slant snarling purple bulb
Secret of his charm.

VIII.

The eloquent Smith
wore a wig, lived with his Mom
like Andy Warhol

IX.

Oh starry eyed Reich
his hobbit beard is dancing
'mongst the Berkeley groves.

X.

Turns out, Valhalla
for moral scientists is
Sweden's Central Bank

XI.

Who knows what might lurk
underneath in the shadows
of Krugman's grey beard

XII.

A marvel of style
sophistication and wit
frames Bernanke's lips.

XIII.

Money illusion –
Adjusting for inflation
Savings disappear.

XIV.

They say a crisis
Is not truly a crisis
'til the banks panic.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for kind remarks by Robin Bates, Randy Brooks, Koen Deconinck, Tim Harford, Gary Langer, Marc Lassagne, Giulia Meloni, Jack Reardon, David Ruccio, Herman Van Rompuy, Jo Swinnen, Mark Thoma, and the Ziliak family.

Comment [t1]: Author: Please confirm that Robin Bates, Randy Brooks, Koen Deconinck, Tim Harford, Gary Langer, Marc Lassagne, Giulia Meloni, Jack Reardon, David Ruccio, Herman Van Rompuy, Jo Swinnen, Mark Thoma, and the Ziliak family were not the reviewers for this paper. Mentioned names of reviewers need to be replaced with 'anonymous reviewers'.

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Notes

- 1 <http://sites.roosevelt.edu/sziliak/official-site-of-the-haiku-economist-aka-stephen-tziliak-2/haiku-economics-by-roosevelt-students/>.