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“Misreading Famous Haiku Verses from the Edo Period”
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The most famous haiku poem in Japan is Bashō’s “An old pond! A frog jumps in, the sound of water” (Furuike ya kawazu to an oto). It is safe to say that all Japanese people know this verse. While it may be true that everyone knows it, it is difficult to say that everyone understands it correctly.

This verse is widely interpreted as one that is rich with deep meaning, that it is a sketch-like portrayal of the sound of water momentarily disrupting the silence of an old pond, then silence at last returning. It is thought that this verse contains nothing of the humor or wit found in earlier poetry by the Tei-mon or Danrin haikai schools, but rather that the old pond’s silence encapsulates the roots of loneliness in human existence. However, this interpretation has a major oversight. Suffice it to say that this reading is a misreading. The “old pond” poem is actually brimming with humor. Touching on traditional sensitivities cultivated in Japanese poetry (waka) and haiku’s position vis-à-vis waka, I will expound on why this is.

In addition to Bashō, I will also take up current misreadings of famous poems by Buson and Issa, reading the verses as they were read by people during the Edo period (1600-1868).

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