

From Stillness to Presence: A Comparative Study of Spatial Poetics in Vietnamese Zen Poetry and Japanese Haiku

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Abstract—While spatiality has been extensively theorized in literary studies, the comparative spatial poetics of Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku remain largely unexplored. This study situates the two traditions within the broader landscape of East Asian Buddhist aesthetics, examining how they share metaphysical foundations yet diverge in aesthetic realization. Vietnamese Zen poetry generates expansive, porous spaces of emptiness and ontological dissolution, where the lyrical self merges with the Dharma realm. By contrast, Haiku crystallizes fleeting perceptual moments of sensory immediacy anchored in seasonal imagery. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space, Juri Lotman’s cultural semiotics, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, the study conducts close readings of poems by Pháp Thuận, Tuệ Trung Th昱, Sĩ, and Trần Nhân Tông, alongside haiku by Bashō, Issa, and Shiki. Through spatial metaphors and symbolic motifs, it identifies two distinct logics: the meditative void and the momentary real. On this basis, the study proposes a dual-axis model juxtaposing ontological silence with sensory presence, thereby advancing intercultural literary theory and contributing to comparative poetics, phenomenological aesthetics, and broader efforts to theorize space as an embodied structure of perception.

Index Terms—spatial poetics, Zen poetry, Haiku, Buddhist aesthetics, phenomenology

I. INTRODUCTION

Poetic space is never neutral. As Bachelard (1994) asserts, space in poetry is not a passive container but an affective, phenomenological force—infused with memory, reverie, and metaphysical imagination. Tuan (1977) distinguishes between abstract space and intimate place, while Casey (1997) defines place as the “thickened now,” a convergence point where embodiment, perception, and meaning coalesce. Together, these perspectives establish poetic space as a dynamic intersection of cultural cosmology and experiential consciousness rather than a geometrical abstraction.

This study explores Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku as two paradigmatic articulations of East Asian Buddhist poetics, each offering a distinct spatial ontology. While both traditions emerge from shared metaphysical foundations—particularly Mahāyāna Buddhist notions of impermanence, emptiness, and interbeing—they diverge in how poetic space is conceived, encoded, and experienced. Vietnamese Zen poetry tends to generate expansive, contemplative spaces characterized by cyclical temporality, metaphysical silence, and non-dual awareness. The spatial logic is centripetal, dissolving the lyrical self into the Dharma realm. In contrast, Japanese Haiku compresses perception into microcosmic fragments—fleeting impressions tied to seasonal phenomena, sensory immediacy, and the haiku moment (*ichigo ichie*). Here, poetic space is centrifugal: it affirms the observer’s embodied presence through compressed imagery and natural detail.

Despite their philosophical kinship, the spatial grammars of these two traditions remain undertheorized in comparative poetics. Existing studies often emphasize thematic, historical, or linguistic contrasts without sufficiently addressing the semiotic infrastructures of spatial representation. To address this gap, the present study is guided by three central questions:

- 1) What semiotic mechanisms of spatial encoding operate within Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku?
- 2) How is the lyrical subject situated within each spatial framework?
- 3) What cultural logics and cognitive schemas underpin their divergent spatial constructions?

To investigate these questions, the study employs a comparative and intercultural theoretical constellation that integrates Bachelard’s (1994) *Poetics of Space*, Lotman’s (1990) cultural semiotics, Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) phenomenology of perception, and anthropogeographic insights from Tuan (1977) and Casey (1997). This composite framework enables a multidimensional inquiry that bridges metaphysical aesthetics, embodied cognition, and symbolic spatiality.

The paper proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 surveys relevant scholarship and delineates the theoretical framework. Section 3 outlines the methodology and corpus selection. Section 4 presents the key findings, with Section 5 providing a comparative discussion. Section 6 offers concluding remarks and academic implications, situating the study within broader discourses in intercultural literary theory and spatial semiotics.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Review of Related Scholarship

Contemporary literary scholarship increasingly regards poetry as a mode of spatial epistemology—an embodied medium through which cultures construct and experience reality via language. Within this paradigm, spatial poetics is not simply a stylistic device but a semiotic system encoding cultural values, metaphysical assumptions, and cognitive orientations (Bachelard, 1994; Casey, 1997; Tuan, 1977).

(a). *Studies on Vietnamese Zen Poetry*

Vietnamese Zen poetry has traditionally been analyzed through its Buddhist foundations, particularly the doctrines of impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anatta*) embedded in poetic form. Foundational contributions by Nguyễn Huệ Chi (2004) and Trần Đình Hượu (1992) frame Zen poetry as a distinctly Vietnamese expression of Buddhist philosophy, emphasizing its spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions. Canonical poets such as Pháp Thuận, Mãn Giác, Trần Nhân Tông, and Tuệ Trung Thuyết are interpreted as exemplars of the integration between poetic language and Zen meditative insight. However, these studies tend to emphasize doctrinal and spiritual content while underexploring spatial poetics as a vehicle for cognitive and symbolic structuring.

Emerging comparative efforts have begun to position Vietnamese Zen poetry within broader East Asian metaphysical traditions. Yet these studies often remain descriptive rather than analytically rigorous, lacking a systematic framework that unites semiotics, phenomenology, and cognitive poetics. A clear theoretical lacuna persists regarding how space is configured and encoded in Vietnamese Zen verse.

(b). *Studies on Japanese Haiku*

Japanese Haiku, by contrast, has received more extensive attention, particularly in Western scholarship. Barthes (1970) famously characterizes Haiku as an “open semiotic system,” where language gestures toward the unsaid, embracing semantic indeterminacy. Building on this, Shirane (1998) explores how *kigo* (seasonal words) not only organize temporal experience but also structure spatial affect and cultural memory. Ueda (1998) and Qiu (2005) examine Haiku’s perceptual compression, emphasizing its phenomenological orientation toward immediacy and the micro-moment.

Nonetheless, much of this literature remains culturally bounded, treating Haiku as an isolated phenomenon rather than part of a broader Buddhist poetic lineage. Few studies pursue sustained comparative analysis with Vietnamese Zen poetry, and fewer still investigate how their divergent spatial grammars reflect differing ontologies and cultural logics. This scholarly omission signals a significant gap that the present study aims to address.

(c). *Research Gap*

Despite robust individual literatures on Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku, no study has undertaken a direct comparative analysis of their spatial poetics. The absence of an integrated framework that unites spatial semiotics, phenomenological perception, and conceptual metaphor theory limits current understandings of how space, time, and self are constructed in Buddhist-inflected poetic discourse. Addressing this lacuna offers a critical opportunity to explore the interplay between form, perception, and metaphysical vision across divergent yet interrelated literary traditions.

B. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that weaves together four intersecting strands: spatial poetics, cultural semiotics, phenomenology of perception, and conceptual metaphor theory. Each provides a discrete yet complementary lens for analyzing the spatial constructions in Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku—not as ornamental devices but as culturally embedded epistemologies shaped by cognitive and symbolic processes.

(a). *Spatial Poetics – Gaston Bachelard*

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1994) proposes that poetic space is not merely physical but affective and ontological—a resonant domain where memory, sensation, and imagination converge. Central images such as “the house,” “the corner,” and “the night” exemplify what he terms the poetics of imagination, where space becomes interiorized and emotionally charged. This view allows Vietnamese Zen poetry to be read as a symbolic architecture of transcendental emptiness and metaphysical stillness. By contrast, Japanese Haiku engages a more externalized spatiality, anchored in the immediacy of sensory encounters—a distinction that echoes Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) insights into perception.

(b). *Cultural Semiotics – Yuri Lotman*

Lotman’s (1990) concept of the *semiosphere* posits that every culture exists within a bounded symbolic field governed by its own rules of meaning-making. Within this field, poetic language functions as a generator and transmitter of cultural worldviews. Spatial poetics, therefore, is not ideologically neutral but embedded within a culture’s semiotic infrastructure. Applying this to Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku highlights how each tradition—though sharing Buddhist cosmology—operates through distinct symbolic grammars and expressive strategies.

Zen poetry constructs inward, dissolutive spaces aligned with non-duality, whereas Haiku constructs outward, perceptual spaces grounded in seasonal flux.

(c). *Phenomenology of Perception – Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

Merleau-Ponty (2012) emphasizes that spatial awareness is fundamentally embodied—it arises from lived sensory interaction with the world rather than abstract measurement. In Haiku, this manifests in the rendering of dense experiential moments—dewdrops, rustling leaves, a single breath—that activate a compact but existentially potent spatial field. In contrast, Vietnamese Zen poetry often suspends such immediacy, embracing metaphysical silence and cyclical time. Its spatial logic reflects absence rather than presence, aligning with Buddhist concepts such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *anupalabdhi* (non-perception).

(d). *Supporting Lens: Conceptual Metaphor Theory – Lakoff and Johnson*

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor provides a cognitive map for how spatial meaning is structured via image schemas such as containment, verticality, and polarity (e.g., full/empty, rising/falling, inside/outside). These schemas operate beneath conscious awareness, shaping poetic language and perception. Haiku often employs verticality—rising mist, falling leaves—to suggest transience, while Zen poetry deploys vastness or voids to express ontological dissolution. Recognizing these metaphoric patterns enables deeper insight into the cognitive architectures that underlie spatial poetics across both traditions.

III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DATA

A. Research Approach

Situated at the intersection of literary theory, semiotics, and embodied cognition, spatial poetics reconceptualizes space not as a static backdrop but as a culturally encoded and perceptually enacted structure of meaning (Bachelard, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lotman, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This study adopts a cross-cultural comparative model to investigate how Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku articulate spatiality through distinct symbolic logics and sensory orientations rooted in Buddhist cosmology.

By integrating comparative poetics, cultural semiotics, and phenomenology, the analysis moves beyond abstract metaphysical content to examine the concrete mechanisms by which poetic language configures spatial perception as both aesthetic structure and ontological expression. Within this framework, space is not merely represented but inhabited—functioning as a poetic worldview wherein each spatial sign carries layered existential and cultural resonance.

The methodological design unfolds along three interlinked axes:

- **Spatial poetics** (Bachelard, 1994): Examining spatial imagery in relation to the dissolution or emergence of the lyrical self.
- **Cultural semiotics** (Lotman, 1990): Decoding spatial codes within the symbolic grammar of each poetic tradition.
- **Phenomenology of perception** (Merleau-Ponty, 2012): Analyzing sensory immediacy, especially in Haiku’s engagement with momentary perception.

In addition, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) is employed to trace recurring image schemas—such as full/empty, near/far, and high/low—that structure spatial cognition. These schemas illuminate how each tradition encodes spatial meaning through culturally specific yet cognitively grounded metaphoric logic. Together, these frameworks offer a transferable model for analyzing transcultural poetic systems where metaphysical vision converges with embodied awareness.

B. Research Data

(a). *Vietnamese Zen Poetry Corpus*

The Vietnamese corpus is drawn from the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen lineage and prominent Buddhist poet-monks of the Lý–Trần dynasties:

- Pháp Thuận: *Quốc tộ như đằng lạc*
- Mãn Giác: *Cáo tật thị chúng*
- Trần Nhân Tông: *Cư trần lạc đạo* and selected verses from *Thạch thất mị ngữ*
- Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ: selected *kệ ngôn* from *Thượng Sĩ ngữ lục*

Selection criteria include:

- Salient spatial imagery and symbolic frameworks (e.g., mountains, night, emptiness)
- Poetic conciseness with high metaphysical density
- Representation of Zen aesthetics: “stillness without stagnation” and “emptiness without void”

(b). *Japanese Haiku Corpus*

The Japanese corpus spans from the Edo period to the early modern era, representing four canonical voices:

- Matsuo Bashō: excerpts from *Oku no Hosomichi* and *Fuyu no Hi*
- Yosa Buson: Haiku emphasizing seasonal landscapes and painterly composition

- Kobayashi Issa: Haiku of everyday life and human vulnerability
- Masaoka Shiki: modern Haiku highlighting realism and individual perception

Selection criteria include:

- Consistent use of *kigo* (seasonal terms)
- High spatial concreteness (e.g., mist, frogs, cherry blossoms, falling snow)
- Emphasis on *iki no aware*—the aesthetic sensitivity to transience and presence

C. *Analytical Procedure*

The analytical process is conducted in three interrelated stages:

1 Spatial Encoding

- Identification and classification of spatial markers (e.g., clouds, darkness, vastness)
- Mapping these markers onto conceptual image schemas (e.g., containment, emptiness, verticality)

2 Poetic–Semiotic Decoding

- Analyzing how spatial imagery operates within each poem’s symbolic architecture
- Comparing strategies of spatial construction across the two traditions

3 Phenomenological Reconstruction

- Reconstructing the experiential positioning of the lyrical self in relation to poetic space
- Tracing the interplay between sensory presence, metaphysical void, and spatial metaphor

Each stage directly corresponds to a theoretical pillar outlined in Section 2.2, ensuring coherence between analytic procedure and conceptual orientation. This alignment strengthens interpretive rigor and grounds the findings within a clearly articulated interdisciplinary framework.

IV. FINDINGS

A. *Space in Vietnamese Zen Poetry: Transcendental Emptiness and the Flow of the Dharma Realm*

Pháp Thuận – Harmonious Cosmology and the Structure of Simultaneity

Pháp Thuận (914–990), a pioneering monk-poet of early Vietnamese Zen Buddhism during the Early Lê Dynasty, was also a prominent political advisor and metaphysical thinker. His poem *Quốc tộ* (“The Fate of the Nation”), composed in response to Emperor Lê Đại Hành’s inquiry regarding the nation’s future, transcends the confines of political prophecy. It becomes a condensed articulation of Zen Buddhist cosmology, where moral order, metaphysical rhythm, and cosmic interdependence converge within a resonant poetic field:

*The nation’s destiny is like entwining vines,
The Southern realm overflows with rightness.
Though storms may yet arise,
Peace and harmony shall endure through the ages.*

Despite lacking explicit geographical referents—no mountains, rivers, or spatial delineations—the poem evokes a richly relational topology in which metaphor, structure, and rhythm encode a vision of non-possessive spatiality. The central metaphor of “entwining vines” (*đàng lạc*) operates beyond mere flora; it functions as a symbol of ethical, political, and cosmic interdependence. Space is constructed not through visual orientation but through organic cohesion.

Under Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) phenomenology, in which space arises from embodied perception rather than Cartesian coordinates, *Quốc tộ* performs a spatial shift: space is not seen but felt. This aligns with Bachelard’s (1994) view of poetic space as intimate dwelling—a being-with rather than being-in. The final phrase, “eternal peaceful dwelling” (*vạn cổ lạc an cư*), expresses harmony not through dominance but through attunement with the Dharma realm.

Barthes’ (1970) notion of parataxis further illuminates the poem’s structure: its four lines present images side by side, without narrative hierarchy. The entwining vines, Southern realm, potential storms, and peaceful dwelling coexist in simultaneity, producing a multidimensional resonance. This non-linear, spatial logic anticipates the Haiku’s privileging of perception over chronology.

Viewed through the lens of Vietnamese Zen aesthetics, *Quốc tộ* enacts an ontological topology—one constructed through ethical affect rather than spatial geometry. It embodies the indigenous principle of *thuận thiên* (“following Heaven’s way”), where cosmic alignment supersedes control (Tuan, 1977). While Bashō opens poetic space through the splash of a frog in stillness, Pháp Thuận weaves his through entwining vines—kinetic symbols of continuity, harmony, and metaphysical fluidity.

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ – Non-Dual Space and the Dissolution of Dichotomies

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (1230–1291), Zen master and Trần dynasty prince, is often considered the philosophical forerunner of the Trúc Lâm Zen lineage. Unlike Pháp Thuận’s cosmic–political cosmology, Tuệ Trung constructs poetic space as a non-dual perceptual field, where dichotomies dissolve into unified immediacy:

*Spring blossoms laugh in sunlight, red as brocade;
Night rain hums by the window, green as mist.
If not for the spring wind’s ceaseless blowing,
What place on Earth would not be paradise?*

This verse—rich with chromatic and auditory texture—does not represent an external scene. Rather, it evokes a state of interbeing in which nature and consciousness permeate each other. What Bachelard (1994) calls a “soul-space” is manifest: not spatial enclosure, but existential intimacy.

The motif of the “ceaseless spring wind” (*bất đoan*) serves as a spatial generator, producing an immersive, centerless field. As Merleau-Ponty (2012) notes, such space is not geometrically mapped but phenomenologically lived—the subject is not outside the scene but enfolded within its unfolding. Wind, in this context, flows not across terrain but through awareness.

Barthes (1982) distinguishes Zen poetics as favoring pure presentation over symbolic representation. Tuệ Trung’s rhetorical question—“What place on Earth would not be paradise?”—dissolves the sacred/profane binary. Paradise is not elsewhere; it is thus, accessible through perceptual immediacy.

Trần Đình Sử (2020) argues that Vietnamese Zen poetics resists linearity and fixed spatial frames, favoring ontological simultaneity and affective resonance. The poem’s sensory elements—spring, rain, wind, paradise—are not sequential but coexistent, mirroring Suzuki’s (1970) understanding of Zen insight as *sūnyatā* realized through *pratyasamutpāda* (dependent co-arising).

Where Pháp Thuận creates ethical topologies, Tuệ Trung dissolves all representational scaffolding. His poetic space is not something to be depicted or possessed but dwelt within—a luminous field where form and emptiness pulse in rhythmic interpenetration.

Trần Nhân Tông – Spatial Silence and the Presence of Suchness

Trần Nhân Tông (1258–1308), both monarch and Zen patriarch, founded the Trúc Lâm school after abdicating the throne and retiring to Yên Tử Mountain. His poetry reflects a poetics of spiritual renunciation, marked by stillness, clarity, and inwardness:

*Living in the world, delighting in the Dharma,
Eat when hungry, sleep when tired.
Within the house is a priceless jewel—seek it not.
Facing all things with no mind—that is Zen.*

This poem eschews external representation. Instead, it constructs a spatiality rooted in *vô tâm* (no-mind)—a receptive field where perception is unmediated by ego or conceptualization. For Merleau-Ponty (2012), this represents a suspension of interpretive filtering, allowing phenomena to present themselves directly.

Bachelard’s (1994) “mode of inhabitation” helps elucidate this: Zen space is not delineated but inhabited, not measured but embodied. Acts like eating and sleeping become ontological rituals of sufficiency, expressing *wuwei* (non-action), the Daoist principle of effortless alignment with reality (Laozi, 2003, 1998).

Barthes (1970) calls this aesthetic “language without pressure”—where meaning arises not through elaboration but through resonance. The line “Within the house is a priceless jewel” functions as a *kōan*, disrupting rational thought and redirecting attention toward *tathatā* (suchness). As Trần Đình Sử (2020) asserts, silence in Vietnamese Zen verse is not absence but an active semantic field.

In contrast to Haiku’s flash of image that seizes the transient now, Trần Nhân Tông’s space is expansive and ungraspable—an openness that accommodates presence without fixation.

Mãn Giác – Impermanent Space and the Rebirth of Intuition

Mãn Giác (1052–1096), born Nguyễn Trường, left a legacy of deeply introspective Zen verse. His renowned *Cáo tật thị chúng* (“A Farewell to the Sangha”), written just before his death, exemplifies a temporal-spatial fusion grounded in impermanence and intuitive awakening:

*Spring departs—hundred flowers fall.
Spring arrives—hundred flowers smile.
Events pass before the eyes.
Old age settles atop the head.
Say not: ‘Spring ends, all blossoms gone’—
Last night in the courtyard: one plum blossom.*

Rather than describing scenery, the poem enacts a rhythmic simultaneity of decay and renewal. The plum blossom becomes a focal point of perceptual clarity, not as metaphor but as direct encounter. Bachelard (2000) refers to this as the rhythm of time shaping inner space—a lived spatiality borne from duration and attunement.

Merleau-Ponty (2012) would describe this as trans-apparent spatiality: time and space co-arise within embodied perception. The opposition between departure and arrival, fall and bloom, is resolved through rhythm, not contradiction.

Barthes (1982) claims Haiku offers “a slice of reality without symbolic ambition.” Similarly, Mãn Giác’s blossom resists allegorical reading—it simply is, embodying *tathatā*. Nguyễn Văn Hạnh (2019) interprets this mode as “spiritual temporality,” where spatial form arises through meditative awareness rather than description.

Synthesis

In synthesis, each poet offers a distinct model of Zen spatiality:

- Pháp Thuận articulates ethical–cosmic harmony.
- Tuệ Trung dissolves dualities into interbeing.
- Trần Nhân Tông dwells in silent suchness.

- Mãn Giác enacts impermanence-in-motion.

Together, they construct a transcendent yet embodied Vietnamese spatial poetics—fluid, non-dual, and spiritually attuned—distinct from, yet convergent with, the fragmentary immediacy of Japanese Haiku.

B. *Spatiality in Japanese Haiku: Genealogical Paradigms and Microstructural Poetics*

In Japanese Haiku, space is not a passive backdrop but an emergent phenomenon shaped through landscape, sensory immediacy, and perceptual tactility. Rather than being depicted or narrated, it is evoked through micro-events—momentary contact points that catalyze awareness. This aligns with Barthes' (1982) notion of the “semiotic spark” in Eastern aesthetics, wherein meaning arises through absence rather than semantic fullness.

Unlike Vietnamese Zen poetry, which often constructs ontological and contemplative space, Haiku cultivates a perceptual field that is ephemeral yet ontologically potent—rooted in seasonal attunement, embodied minimalism, and non-symbolic presence (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This section traces the genealogical unfolding of spatial paradigms in Japanese Haiku through four canonical figures—Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki—each of whom enacts a distinct spatial modality within an evolving matrix of poetic cognition (Bachelard, 1994; Shirane, 1998).

Matsuo Bashō – Emptiness and Emergent Presence

Matsuo Bashō pioneered a sensory-poetic paradigm in which spatiality is not mapped but allowed to surface. His poetry foregrounds not explanation but evocation—where perception crystallizes without mediation. One of his most iconic haiku illustrates this logic:

*The old pond—
A frog leaps in—
The sound of water*
(古池や / 蛙飛びこむ / 水の音)

This poem unfolds across three sensory loci: the temporal stillness of the old pond, the kinetic trace of the frog's leap, and the sonic ripple of water. The result is a liminal space where silence, motion, and sound momentarily converge. Bachelard (1994) sees such space as affectively intimate, generated through resonance rather than geometry. It is the disruption of stillness that reveals presence.

Barthes (1970) contends that Haiku suspends semiotic closure. In Bashō's verse, the “sound of water” is not metaphorical but ontologically immediate—a sensory trace that resists interpretation. From a phenomenological standpoint, Merleau-Ponty (2012) would regard the frog's leap as an embodied gesture that co-constitutes space through perception and motion.

Ueda (1982) emphasizes that Bashō's spatiality is grounded in Zen insight: the Dharma is not symbolized but disclosed through ordinary acts. The old pond and the frog's splash are not representations—they are *tathatā*, or suchness, manifesting reality without interpretive filters.

Yosa Buson – Visual Ellipsis and Incomplete Composition

Yosa Buson (1716–1784), both poet and painter, introduced a pictorial modality of Haiku spatiality grounded in *ma* (間)—the aesthetic of the interval. His haiku often substitute direct depiction with gestural suggestiveness. One example captures this:

*Summer river—
The joy of crossing it—
Taking off my sandals*
(夏川を / 越すうれしさよ / 草鞋ぬぎ)

Rather than describing the river, Buson evokes it through the act of removing sandals. Spatiality arises through tactile transition, not visual detail. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (2012) corporeal spatiality, wherein space is lived through the body's threshold engagements.

Barthes (1970) interprets such moments as poetic fragments that resist completion. The reader must co-create the space—a process of perceptual invitation rather than narrative resolution. Shirane (1998) situates this within the aesthetics of *sumi-e* painting, where unpainted space becomes active, not empty. Buson's *ma* operates not through Bashō's contemplative *mu* (emptiness), but through visual deferral.

Thus, Buson's space is gestural and elliptical. His haiku generates an aperture—glimpsed but incomplete—requiring the reader to step in barefoot, so to speak, into a field of partial visibility.

Kobayashi Issa – Affective Suspension and Microscopic Spatiality

Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) reconfigures spatiality through emotional condensation and micro-phenomena. Insects, children, dew, and other fragile presences become spatial operators charged with existential depth. His most famous haiku exemplifies this:

*This world of dew—
A world of dew it is indeed—
And yet, and yet...*
(露の世は / 露の世ながら / さりながら)

Composed in mourning for his daughter, the poem affirms Buddhist impermanence while hesitating to surrender to it. The third line (*sarinagara*) suspends closure, creating an affective ellipsis. For Merleau-Ponty (2012), such spatiality emerges not from abstraction but from bodily proximity—dew as a tactile, transient encounter.

Barthes (1970) might call this a “commentary without commentary”—a space where language ceases and sensation carries meaning. Koren (1994) connects this to *wabi-sabi*, the aesthetic of incomplete beauty. Issa’s space is emotionally porous and unresolvable; it does not transcend suffering but dwells in it.

Shirane (1998) notes Issa’s departure from Edo-period restraint. His haiku fuses perception with empathy, offering a non-neutral field where loss and presence entwine. Compared to Bashō’s perceptual rupture and Buson’s visual suspension, Issa’s space is fragile, embodied, and affectively unresolved.

Masaoka Shiki – Descriptive Realism and Phenomenological Flattening

Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), a key modernizer of Haiku, breaks from mystical and Zen-inflected spatiality by advancing *shasei* (写生)—the sketching of life. His poetry affirms the descriptive act as spatial production. A representative haiku reads:

After bathing—
The lake looks as though
Freshly shaved
(湯あがりの湖は剃られたるごとくなり)

Here, the lake is rendered not metaphorically but through sensory analogy. The “freshly shaved” simile links bodily experience to environmental perception. Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) notion of perception as embodied and situated resonates here: the lake’s texture is apprehended through the post-bathing body.

Barthes (1970) would classify this as “non-transcendent signification.” The poem does not allegorize but stays within empirical visibility. Shirane (1998) distinguishes Haiku’s vertical (spiritual) and horizontal (descriptive) axes; Shiki reorients the form horizontally, privileging modern phenomenological realism.

Keene (1999) argues that Shiki’s empirical flattening enabled Haiku’s entry into literary modernity. By neutralizing symbolic space, Shiki aligned the form with observational precision rather than metaphysical depth. His spatiality is thus dry, deliberate, and surface-bound—a marked contrast to Bashō’s metaphysical silence or Issa’s emotional saturation.

Synthesis

In synthesis:

- Bashō crafts a space of perceptual rupture—brief, liminal, ontologically open.
- Buson opens an elliptical space—gestural, fragmentary, visually suggestive.
- Issa dwells in affective suspension—where tenderness and impermanence intertwine.
- Shiki constructs an empirical space—flat, literal, and corporeally indexed.

These four spatial logics form a genealogical continuum—from contemplative presence to modern realism. While Vietnamese Zen poetry explores emptiness as stillness and interbeing, Japanese Haiku locates emptiness in momentum—the temporal rupture, the pause between breaths, the echo of a sound. In Haiku, spatiality is always becoming—never fixed, never resolved—attuned not to possession, but to passing.

C. Comparative Spatial Models in Vietnamese Zen Poetry and Japanese Haiku

(a). Similarities: Space as a Perceptual Act

Despite their distinct religious and aesthetic trajectories, Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku converge on a foundational epistemological stance: space is not a passive container but a lived field of perception. Rather than delineating space through objective description or narrative structure, both traditions frame it as a phenomenological unfolding shaped by embodied awareness and direct experience.

Informed by Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) phenomenology, this shared poetics reflects an ontological paradigm of interbeing, wherein subject and world co-arise. In both traditions, the poem acts as a perceptual event—minimal in form yet dense in existential resonance. Language is distilled to its elemental function: evoking presence without enclosing it in abstraction.

In Vietnamese Zen poetry, perception arises through inner stillness cultivated by *vô tâm* (no-mind) and contemplative insight (*quán chiếu*). Japanese Haiku, by contrast, is triggered by external sensory cues—seasonal shifts, tactile impressions, or acoustic phenomena. Yet both traditions construe perception as a site of engagement with being.

Zen poetry opens a metaphysical spatiality grounded in dharmic awareness, where form and emptiness interpenetrate. Haiku’s spatiality is sensory and temporal, crystallizing in a moment of perceptual rupture. Bashō’s iconic frog haiku, for instance, generates space not through depiction but through an acoustic incision that awakens presence (Barthes, 1970; Bachelard, 1994; Ueda, 1982).

Both traditions reject symbolic representation in favor of ontological disclosure. In Zen poetry, this surfaces through insight into *vô sinh pháp nhẫn* (the patience of non-arising); in Haiku, it emerges as the suspension of time in an epiphanic flash of *tathatā* (suchness). The purpose is not to communicate a message but to instantiate a direct awareness of being.

Technically, Zen poets employ aphasia, semantic erasure, and ontological silence to evoke the ineffable (Nguyễn, 2004), while Haiku relies on *kireji* (cutting words), juxtaposition, and *kigo* (seasonal referents) to generate perceptual rupture (Shirane, 1998). In both, poetic form is catalytic rather than representational.

Ultimately, both dissolve the boundary between word and world. As Barthes (1970) observes, this is “language without center”—a semiotic field that gestures toward presence without closure. Spatiality becomes not a description of external form, but a locus of encounter between self and the real.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF SPACE AS A PERCEPTUAL ACT

No. Aspect	Vietnamese Zen Poetry	Japanese Haiku
1 Source of perception	Inward: <i>vô tâm</i> , contemplative introspection	Outward: external sensory triggers
2 Nature of space	Metaphysical: dharmic, non-dual	Phenomenological: sensory, embodied
3 Aim of perception	Realization of non-arising insight	Suspension of being in <i>tathatā</i> (suchness)
4 Poetic technique	Semantic silence, aphasia, indirectness	<i>Kireji</i> , minimalism, juxtaposition
5 Language-perception	Dissolution of language to reveal insight	Condensation of language to trigger rupture

Source. Synthesized from Bachelard (1994), Barthes (1970), Merleau-Ponty (2012), Nguyễn (2004, 2014), Shirane (1998), Suzuki (1970), Tuan (1977), and Ueda (1982, 1992).

While both traditions regard poetic space as perceptual, the nature and orientation of that perception diverge in their metaphysical underpinnings and poetic techniques. These divergences are elaborated below.

(b). Differences

a. Ontological Divergence: Non-Abiding Space vs. Momentary Presence

The ontological divergence between the two traditions is most apparent in their spatial constructions. Vietnamese Zen poetry treats space as *vô trụ* (non-abiding)—unfixed, unpossessable, and fundamentally empty. Japanese Haiku, by contrast, articulates space through the sudden emergence of a transient perceptual event.

TABLE 2
ONTOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE: “NON-ABIDING SPACE” VS. “MOMENTARY PRESENCE”

No. Aspect	Vietnamese Zen Poetry	Japanese Haiku
1 Nature of space	<i>Non-abiding, formless, unattached</i>	<i>Singular moment of perceptual presence</i>
2 Spatial creation	Arises from no-mind, meditative stillness	Triggered by sensory rupture
3 Temporal ontology	Timeless, cyclic, metaphysically flowing	Ephemeral, punctual, presentist

Source. Developed from Merleau-Ponty (2012), Nguyễn (2004, 2014), Suzuki (1970), Ueda (1982), and Shirane (1998). Concepts of *vô trụ* (non-abiding) and *vô tâm* (no-mind) derive from Zen Buddhist metaphysics, while momentary presence in Haiku aligns with phenomenological ephemerality and *tathatā* (suchness).

Vietnamese Zen spatiality is rooted in Mahāyāna insight, where emptiness is not nihilism but the unfixed locus of awakening (Lý Thái Hư, 1936). Space here is to be realized, not represented. Japanese Haiku, by contrast, reveals space through sonic or visual rupture—a frog’s splash, a falling petal—offering a flash of being within temporal finitude (Shirane, 1998; Heine, 1997).

Zen space emerges from contemplative emptiness (*vô niệ̣m*), collapsing dualistic distinctions and inviting intuitive awareness. Haiku space is generated through external triggers that punctuate the flow of perception—what Shirane (1998) terms a “poetics of rupture.”

Zen’s spatial ontology is cyclical and eternal, aligned with the rhythm of the Dharma. Haiku’s is momentary and incisive—a phenomenological incision into the now.

b. Aesthetic Divergence: Emptiness-as-Feeling vs. Concrete Presence

Aesthetically, Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku differ in their orientation toward the visible and the sayable. Zen poetics privileges “emptiness-as-feeling”—a resonance grounded in silence and ungraspability. Haiku, by contrast, favors concrete presence, capturing the transient world in sharply focused sensory images.

TABLE 3
AESTHETIC DIVERGENCE: EMPTINESS-AS-FEELING VS. CONCRETE PRESENCE

No. Aspect	Vietnamese Zen Poetry	Japanese Haiku
1 Aesthetic principle	Detachment, stillness, non-representation	Vivid imagery, perceptual immediacy
2 Perceptual orientation	Inward: evocation of the ineffable	Outward: perception through concrete stimuli
3 Foundational aesthetics	<i>Śūnyatā</i> , <i>wu wei</i> , ontological fluidity	<i>Wabi-sabi</i> , <i>yūgen</i> , <i>mono no aware</i>

Source. Synthesized from Barthes (1970), Bachelard (1994), Suzuki (1970), Nguyễn (2004, 2014), Shirane (1998), and Ueda (1982, 1992). Key aesthetic concepts such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *wu wei* (effortless action), *wabi-sabi* (austere beauty), *yūgen* (mysterious depth), and *mono no aware* (pathos of things) are interpreted within their respective Zen and Haiku traditions.

Zen poetry adheres to metaphysical aesthetics: *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *wu wei* (non-striving), and non-duality. As Lý Thái Hư (1936) emphasized, “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” (*sắc tức thị không*). Beauty lies in the absence

of assertion—what Nguyễn (2019) calls “ontological stillness.” In Haiku, by contrast, beauty emerges from perceptual exactness—mist, dew, frogs, sandals—capturing *mono no aware*, the poignancy of fleeting things (Shirane, 1998).

Zen poetic space is ungraspable and interior. Haiku space is tactile and exterior. Zen evokes the unmanifest through quietude. Haiku arrests the manifest in a flash.

In sum, Zen spatiality is constructed through spiritual negation and meditative introspection; Haiku’s through perceptual affirmation and aesthetic minimalism. These divergent spatial logics reflect broader differences in how each tradition understands the relationship between being, language, and poetic form.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Overview of Key Findings

The comparative analysis reveals a nuanced spatial poetics in both Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku. Despite their distinct religious and formal genealogies, both traditions converge in treating space not as an external container but as a perceptual field. In each, poetic space arises through immediate awareness—internally generated in Zen, externally triggered in Haiku—aligning with a phenomenological poetics in which language enacts rather than merely describes presence.

This shared orientation is mapped in Table 1, which illustrates how both traditions structure poetic space through perceptual engagement rather than symbolic representation. Vietnamese Zen poetry privileges inner stillness and ontological resonance, while Haiku emphasizes perceptual rupture and sensory minimalism.

Beneath this convergence lie key divergences. Zen poetry articulates a “space of non-abiding” (*vô trụ*): fluid, non-possessive, and metaphysically open. Haiku, by contrast, isolates a transient, embodied moment—concrete, irreducible, and emotionally compressed. As summarized in Table 2, Zen spatiality resists fixation and unfolds across timeless metaphysical fields, while Haiku crystallizes being within a singular perceptual event. Aesthetically, as Table 3 indicates, Zen foregrounds absence and stillness, whereas Haiku captures fleeting presence through compressed sensory imagery. These findings provide a foundation for deeper theoretical engagement.

B. Theoretical Resonances and Implications

These insights resonate with broader theoretical domains, particularly phenomenology, semiotics, and cognitive poetics. Merleau-Ponty (2012) argues that space emerges from embodied perception—a notion mirrored in Zen’s meditative inwardness and Haiku’s sensory immediacy. Bachelard (1994) conceives poetic space as an affective dwelling; both traditions evoke spatial intimacy without relying on narrative scaffolding.

Barthes (1970) characterizes Eastern poetics as a form of “negative semiotics,” where meaning emerges through absence. Zen’s *vô ngôn* and Haiku’s *kireji* or *kigo* function as semantic lacunae, intensifying interpretive engagement. Lotman (1990) views poetic space as a semiotic model of culture: Zen encodes metaphysical non-duality, while Haiku encodes perceptual minimalism. These poetic spaces exemplify distinct yet symmetrical systems of cultural signification.

More crucially, the comparative framework drawn from Tables 1 through 3 confirms that poetic space in both traditions is not descriptive but generative—an ontological field shaped by perceptual orientation. Poetry thus becomes a medium of aesthetic and epistemic cognition rather than a repository of symbolic meanings.

C. Dialogue With Existing Research

Scholarship on Vietnamese Zen poetry (e.g., Trần, 2005; Nguyễn, 2014) has emphasized *vô ngôn* and ontological stillness but has rarely examined spatiality as a central poetic mechanism. This study addresses that lacuna by framing space as a structured perceptual field, open to cross-traditional comparison.

In Haiku studies, Ueda (1992) and Shirane (1998) have explored aesthetic and philosophical dimensions, though seldom through intra-Asian comparative frameworks. By aligning Zen poetry and Haiku, this study constructs a regional paradigm that challenges East–West binaries and repositions Asian poetics within a dialogic global context.

Moreover, the study contributes to emerging discourses in cognitive poetics and phenomenological aesthetics. Rather than treating Zen and Haiku as vessels of spiritual allegory, it interprets them as perceptual instruments that facilitate presence, attention, and resonance. The tables presented in Section 4.3 are integral in formalizing these perceptual grammars, making the spatial logics of Zen and Haiku analytically comparable.

D. Interdisciplinary Applications and Broader Implications

This research suggests four key interdisciplinary applications:

1) Philosophy and Religion. Both traditions enact ontologies of emptiness, impermanence, and immediacy grounded in Buddhist and Daoist cosmologies. The divergence between non-abiding space and momentary presence (Table 2) offers contrasting models of metaphysical time and embodiment.

2) Cognitive Poetics. Poetic form becomes a mechanism for perceptual reconfiguration—reshaping not only what is perceived but how perception unfolds. The comparison in Table 1 underscores the role of attention, silence, and sensory cues in poetic cognition.

3) Cultural Semiotics. Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku offer intra-Asian models of spatial-symbolic articulation within shared philosophical horizons. Table 3 highlights how emptiness and presence are aesthetically encoded through culturally specific yet dialogically resonant tropes.

4) Pedagogy and Creative Practice. The comparative spatial model developed here can inform the teaching of minimalist aesthetics, comparative poetics, and East Asian literature. It invites a mode of poetic inhabitation—one that resonates with presence rather than consumes it. Educators and poets alike may draw upon these frameworks to cultivate attentiveness, restraint, and reverence for the unspoken.

VI. CONCLUSION AND ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS

A. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a cross-cultural inquiry into the spatial poetics of Vietnamese Zen poetry and Japanese Haiku, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology, Bachelard's (1994) spatial aesthetics, Lotman's (1990) cultural semiotics, and Barthes's (1970) aesthetics of absence. Through close readings of representative poets—Pháp Thuận, Tuệ Trung, Trần Nhân Tông, and Mãn Giác from Vietnam; Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki from Japan—three interrelated findings emerge.

First, both traditions conceptualize poetic space not as a geometric construct but as a perceptual act. In Vietnamese Zen poetry, spatiality is generated through meditative consciousness, aligning with the Buddhist principle of *vô tâm* (non-mind). In Haiku, it emerges from sensory immediacy, often grounded in seasonal imagery or acoustic cues. Both traditions resonate with Merleau-Ponty's (2012) notion of embodied perception as the basis of spatial experience.

Second, the two traditions diverge ontologically. Vietnamese Zen poetry constructs a “non-abiding space”—unlocalized, metaphysically open, and grounded in non-duality. In contrast, Japanese Haiku presents an “immanent space”—a perceptual field rooted in momentariness and sensory singularity. As demonstrated in Table 1, these ontological differences reveal contrasting models of temporality and presence.

Third, their aesthetic strategies also differ. Zen poetics realizes presence through absence—via negation, aphasia, and semantic quietude—whereas Haiku evokes presence through minimalism and formal condensation. Table 2 highlights this contrast: Vietnamese Zen relies on metaphysical ellipsis, Haiku on perceptual precision. These complementary logics exemplify divergent yet symmetrical modalities of poetic world-making.

B. Scholarly Contributions

This research offers three critical contributions to comparative poetics and literary theory:

1) It theorizes poetic space as a perceptual structure, integrating Eastern ontologies with Western phenomenology and semiotic theory.

2) It repositions Vietnamese Zen poetry as a distinct poetics within East Asia, proposing a dialogic rather than derivative relation with Haiku.

3) It proposes a regional comparative paradigm that displaces the East–West binary, privileging intra-Asian aesthetic diversity.

C. Interdisciplinary Prospects and Future Research

This study's findings extend into multiple disciplinary terrains:

- **Comparative Literature.** It provides a pedagogical model for teaching poetry as spatial and ontological encounter rather than linguistic ornamentation.

- **Translation Studies.** It suggests a perception-centered approach, emphasizing spatial and sensory resonance over strict lexical fidelity.

- **Creative Writing.** It advocates for minimalist and meditative techniques that foreground immediacy, silence, and embodied awareness.

Future research may extend this spatial–perceptual model to:

- Comparative readings between Vietnamese Zen poetry and Tang–Song Chinese verse to explore regional innovation.

- Dialogues between Haiku and Western minimalism (e.g., Pound, Armantrout) to map global aesthetics of space.

- Applications to visual poetry or experimental cinema, examining how poetic space transcends medium boundaries.

Ultimately, this study reconceptualizes poetic space not as background but as a mode of being. The meditative silences of Zen and the luminous instants of Haiku gesture toward a trans-Asian aesthetics in which emptiness is not absence but generative potential—and spatial poetics becomes an ontology of presence.

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