

To Haijin or Not to Haijin

by William J Higginson

There are at least two words in Japanese pronounced *haijin*, and one of them means "crippled person" (they are written with different kanji). Since the word in that sense seems to be alive in English-language computer gaming culture, it might be wise to avoid it in our haiku poetry scene, but since the two words generally apply to relatively separate cultural groups, it may not make a great deal of difference. On the other hand, imagine the confusion of people consulting English-language dictionaries in 2020:

Where one will say something like haijin (from Japanese *haijin*, crippled person): a person so involved in computer gaming that the rest of his life is dysfunctional; another may say haijin (from Japanese *haijin*, haiku person): a person who writes haiku.

Then, imagine a haiku e-list where someone, unaware of the adoption of two different Japanese words that happen to be homonyms in two different sub-cultures, looks up the word in the first dictionary and writes to upbraid another member of the list for calling him a cripple!

In Japan, haiku poets tend to use *haijin* in haiku contexts, but will sometimes shy away from it in general public contexts, precisely because of the homonym. No one in Japan is likely to answer the questions "What does that person do?" or "Who is s/he?" with "S/he's a *haijin*" unless the person in question is, in fact, a physically handicapped person. In general conversation in Japanese, sometimes the phrase *haiku o tsukuru hito* ("a person who writes haiku") will be used.

A modern Japanese dictionary (*Kojien*, the best one-volume dictionary in Japanese), defines *haijin* thus (of course, this is speaking of Japanese persons only):

- a) A person who writes haiku as a pastime, or as an occupation (profession);
- b) A haikai master;
- c) A person who writes many haiku; a haiku master.

Kojien, as wonderful as it is, is a mainstream dictionary, and, as in our current search, has relatively brief entries. To fully understand how *haijin* is used in Japanese, I'll draw on use in print and conversations with Japanese haiku people on just this question.

In print, it seems that Japanese use *haijin* in all three ways indicated above. But (a) seems mainly the mainstream press, where that essential ambiguity between pastime and profession exists. In haiku publications, there's a sense that *haijin* means people who devote their main efforts to haiku, and even more, those who have achieved some claim to fame in haiku.

One proof is that we have the organisation calling itself the *Haijin kyôkai*, which has admission requirements that go well beyond the paying of dues. Opposing this a bit, we have the fact that the *Haijin kyôkai* itself translates its own organisational name into English as the "Haiku Poets Association" - which any English speaker would normally assume means simply an association of haiku poets, at whatever level of accomplishment or recognition.

I've heard Japanese in haiku circles use *haijin* and *sensei* (master) almost interchangeably, when speaking generically. (If speaking of a particular haiku master by name, or of their own master, they will virtually always use *sensei*.)

When I have raised the question of the meaning of *haijin* with Japanese haiku poets, they have usually indicated fairly firmly that *haijin* refers to an accomplished haiku poet, not just anyone who writes haiku. In an English-language context, Japanese use both "haiku writer" and "haiku poet", and "haiku poet" is fairly common in North America, though we see and hear "haiku writer" too. Most Japanese haiku people I've spoken with are likely to use "haijin" in English only as an equivalent for "haiku master" - and either of these terms most likely refers to a Japanese, not a foreign poet, no matter how accomplished or recognised.

Can we say "haiku poet" or "haiku master" in English when we mean something akin to *haijin* in Japanese?

"Haiku master" - when applied to any non-Japanese haiku person - makes me nervous, because the term *sensei* in a haiku context in Japan means someone who has received training from a recognised master and has, him- or herself, become a recognised master, with cadres of disciples, an organisation, and a magazine, all backing up that claim. These matters - training and lineage, disciples, and organisation and magazine - all collectively define *sensei* in Japanese haiku. We have nothing comparable in English-language haiku circles that I would recognise as operating at the master level, though we certainly have some haiku poets whom we might style as masters. But even there, I'd be more comfortable in saying something like "leading haiku poet" than "haiku master".

On the other hand, "haiku poet" is a purely English-language invention (used in North America since ca. 1965, I believe) that has been adopted by some Japanese when translating *haijin* into English, precisely because *haijin* is so devilishly hard to deal with, even in Japanese. "Haiku poet" has always seemed to me to be the preferable term. (I do use *haijin* when speaking Japanese, precisely where I would use "haiku poet" or "haiku master" in English. In either case, I'd be referring to someone fairly prominent. Otherwise, I would use that equivalent of "haiku writer" that I mentioned earlier, *haiku o tsukuru hito*.)

Historically, in addition to "haiku poet" some English speakers use "haikuist", as do some Japanese when speaking in English. Japanese who support "haikuist" claim the word is formed as naturally as "novelist" and on one level, I agree. But generally speaking, we don't use "novelist" except for those writers who have published one or more novels. And publishing a novel suggests at least a somewhat professional level of writing. But haiku are generally written by

amateurs, and while amateurs account for wonderful things in this world, the word "haikuist" in English immediately suggests "amateurish" to my ears.

My own informal Google survey indicates that "haiku poet" has a clear lead over either "haikuist" or "haijin" in English-language haiku contexts on the internet, which is admittedly a very populist place. So I think I will stick with "haiku poet" as being the easiest to understand. So far, not everyone knows what a haiku is, much less a "haijin", and I'm much more concerned with the understanding and appreciation of the former than with the latter. Why so much concern over what we call ourselves, when there are other, much more important fish to fry? If we can ever convince the elementary school teachers and the main-line poets that haiku is not really best in 5-7-5 in English, that will be a real accomplishment. What we call the people who write them just needs to be clear and simple - and already is, to my taste.

Note: This piece was written in response to a query on the New Zealand Poetry Society website about the use of the term "haijin". William J. Higginson is one of the world's leading haiku writers and author of *The Haiku Handbook*, *The Haiku Seasons*, *Haiku World*, etc.