

Haiku As a World Phenomenon

by Susumu Takiguchi

"...After about twenty-five years of English language haiku do we know what haiku is?"(1) It is refreshing to hear such a modest remark as this from such a doyen of haiku poetry as Cor van den Heuvel. The remark was made nearly fourteen years ago. Are we any wiser? The lack of general consensus on this question looked to him to be "a sign of its health and vitality".

Are haiku poems written today not only in English but also in all other languages in good health and full of vitality? Do we retain van den Heuvel's humility?

Some say that they are now tired of this "What is haiku?" question repeated countless times. Others still insist that this and other fundamental questions on haiku "have not become old questions" (2). In a similar vein, is the question "What is time?" boring as opposed to the question "What time is it?", which may be boring?

While not only Japan but also the rest of the world seem to be enjoying an unprecedented popularity and proliferation of haiku, there are some worrying signs as well. The history of haiku is a succession of prosperity followed by decline. So, the ups and downs of the haiku movement are nothing new.

What is different in today's haiku scene is that prosperity and deterioration are there simultaneously. It has been pointed out that symptoms of the deterioration include stagnation of existing haiku movements, lowering of the standards and quality of haiku, commercialisation of haiku, factional rivalries, self-aggrandizement and deterioration and corruption generally. They have been seen to be sapping the health and vitality of haiku and yet precious little seems to be done about it. How has this state of affairs come about and how can we possibly free ourselves from this situation?

"Fueki ryuko" (3) is an answer. This is one of the essential principles of what I call Basho's dialectic poetics. It should be given much greater significance than was originally perceived. This is because it now applies to almost all aspects of modern Japan where the balance between fueki, or permanent values, and ryuko, or changes, is shaky. A similar situation is also seen elsewhere in the world.

The two words can be interpreted in more ways than one. Fueki, for instance, can represent unchanging tradition while ryuko can represent changing fashion. Since the two are contradictory there should be a kind of creative tension generated between them. This tension should keep haiku fresh, creative and

interesting. If people cling to tradition and neglect newness (or atarashimi) inherent in fashion, then haiku could become stale, imitative and boring. If, on the other hand, people indulge in newness without tradition, haiku could become gimmicky, incomprehensible and nonsensical. Needless to say, fueki should be genuine fueki, and ryuko should be genuine ryuko. And here starts one of the most important arguments, "What makes fueki and ryuko genuine?"

Another answer would be "Kogo kizoku". This is also a principle of Basho's dialectic poetics and means "obtaining high enlightenment but coming back to the populace". There has been a tendency to polarise these two essential factors so much that they have lost their vital link. Some people have become "elitists", armed with their own creed and are negligent of kizoku, or addressing plebeian needs. Others have gone the opposite way and vulgarised haiku by neglecting kogo. Again, we need both of these factors interacting and forming creative tension.

If we are blessed with kogo at all, then that is better than nothing. However, we have witnessed the deterioration of the quality of kogo. Some haiku debates are perceived to be nothing but poor and often empty rhetoric. Even worse, some others are taken to be merely a collection of dogmas, or misconceptions.

The third answer may be found in the teaching of Basho, "Don't follow ancient masters, seek what they tried to seek". We see people blindly following not only ancient masters but also modern masters without knowing what they tried to seek. What this means is that we are in need of going back to basics and deepening our thought and understanding of the fundamental issues still to be addressed. One way of doing so may be for us to do an honest and critical review and reassessment of the current haiku movements, including their well-established canon. Only then will we be in a position to discuss the fundamental issues of haiku and to find ways in which haiku will be allowed to develop further in good health and vitality.

Now that haiku has spread across the world, we might as well do such a review and reassessment on a worldwide scale. In this regard what is painfully lacking is the true communication between Japan and the rest of the world. This is regrettable for both parties because Japan could gain some insight and inspiration from the way haiku is written overseas in order to break the stalemate which her own haiku world seems to be experiencing. Also the rest of the world could learn whatever it has not yet learnt from Japan and could correct whatever misconceptions it might have developed in the absence of the true understanding of Japanese haiku.

Outside Japan, communication among haiku people is much better by comparison but it is by no means adequate or perfect. More co-ordination and exchange is needed. Regionally, things are improving through such means as international conferences, mutual exchange of information and people and last but not least

through use of the Internet. Ideally, efforts in this direction on a worldwide basis need to be made. World Haiku Festival 2000 which the present author is organising in Britain for the year 2000 is the world's first event of its kind. If the "Prelude to HAIKU2000" which started in 1998 and the "Epilogue to World Haiku Festival 2000" planned for May 2001 are included, this project spans four long years and involves a great number of haiku events for the purpose of disseminating and developing haiku at the same time.

The most important characteristic of World Haiku Festival 2000 is that it looks upon haiku not as a product of one particular country, or of a group of countries but as a literary and cultural phenomenon of the whole world, a standpoint which has never been taken before. It does not mean, however, that each constituent country is not important. On the contrary, each haiku country is put in the world's perspective and studied more vigorously than before. World Haiku Festival 2000 is a worldwide network which transcends factionalism, nationalism, imperialism and any other undesirable rivalries and disputes as well as any hindrances to positive, constructive and friendly relationships among haikin of the world.

It is very exciting that similar movements, aimed at making haiku a world phenomenon, are beginning to emerge in different parts of the world. If this becomes a strong and concerted trend, half the battle is won. Those people who are spearheading this type of movement are hoping that haiku clubs and associations in different countries and, most importantly, each haikin everywhere in the world will join in this movement. However, they will only be able to do so if they are prepared to overcome their narrow-minded factionalism and personal self-aggrandizement and take a humble and friendly stance.

We need to draw a world map of haiku. We also need to write a history of haiku from the world's perspective. In this way, we share our resources and drive and avoid wasteful overlapping. We may also be able to overcome the aforesaid damaging rivalries and narrow-minded isolationist attitude and a host of undesirable human foibles all of which are observed in the modern haiku scene. Many leading haiku poets in the world with whom I have made friends as I prepare for World Haiku Festival 2000 are seriously seeking the right way, or a likely way, in which haiku can develop in the future. I call them 'haiku thinkers' and they can make an enormous contribution to the advancement of world haiku if their efforts are co-ordinated. All too often it is pointed out that in such efforts, sadly, the Japanese are conspicuous by their absence.

We also need to compile a new classification of haiku which has reached a stage of such diversification that we constantly run the risk of talking cross purposes if we just use 'haiku' as a general term. At this stage, the classification need not be too elaborate or detailed as in the case of Masaoka Shiki's efforts. Avant-garde haiku poets cannot possibly be speaking the same language as fundamentalists of the traditional haiku school. In paintings, we accept the co-existence of the Old Masters, religious paintings, landscapes, still lifes, seascapes, figurative, abstract,

surrealism, conceptual art, pop art, minimalist, Japanese paintings, African art, or whatever. There is no point in denying somebody else's haiku as being not haiku, when we have such varieties of haiku poems in over seventy different languages (4).

Ultimately, we are after truths. If St. Augustine said that poetry was devil's wine (5), it must be that poetry is a powerful wine. One reason why it is powerful is that "in vino veritas". A poet said that wine was bottled poetry (6). Then the essence of poetry must be truths, and universal truths at that. As Aristotle put it, (While poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts." (7) When Basho talks about fuga no makoto, this is normally interpreted as poetic sincerity. However, makoto also means truths, or true words, or true things. In ancient times makoto referred to man's spiritual state where shin (truth), zen (goodness) and bi (beauty) were integrated. In terms of poets, makoto is that which springs from their magokoro (true heart, or soul). Haiku is certainly capable of (local, particular) truths. Sometimes it is capable of universal truths and that is when great haiku poems are born.

Poetic truths, then, must be a criterion against which inferior and dubious haiku poems can be weeded out. Haiku is part of the haiku poet's way of life. Haiku is partly what he or she is. If he or she is not truthful his or her haiku cannot be good poetry. In today's climate where haiku values are confused, it is important for us to go back to such stringent criterion as poetic truths.

This point has been eloquently described by our contemporary haijin Jim Kacian in a recently published book entitled KNOTS with a hole in the middle of it, through which one passes a string and tie the book by making a knot. It goes, This is what is indestructible in haiku, what has made it grow from one nation's cultural export to a world's form of choice to reveal the truth and beauty of the deep moments, the connected moments, of our lives." (8)

Though fuga no makoto must not be taken too narrowly, it is instructive that it relates to truths first and foremost and not to beauty. Basho was not a mere natural poet, a point which should be brought to the attention of some haiku poets of the traditional school of haiku, who emphasise natural beauty to the exclusion of other haiku values.

There are a great deal more things that Japan and the rest of the world can and must do to move on and find the way forward in the interest of the further development of world haiku. World Haiku Festival 2000 aims to provide some of the answers and also tries to encourage haijin from all corners of the world to join in the movement it has started. The readers of this pioneering haiku magazine are welcome to discuss these matters with.

Notes:

- (1) Preface to the Second Edition, "The Haiku Anthology, Haiku and Senryu in English, Simon & Schuster, 1986, p 19.
- (2) Lee Gurga, "The Midwest: Cradle of American Haiku" , 5 July 1999.
- (3) Fueki ryuko is one of the key concepts of Basho's poetics.
- (4) There is no "official" statistics. This figure is only according to an estimate.
- (5) "Poetry is devil's wine", Contra Academicos, St. Augustine (AD 354-430)
- (6) Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)
- (7) Poetics, Aristotle (384-322BC)
- (8) Jim Kacian, "Tapping the Common Well", Knots - The Anthology of Southeastern European Haiku Poetry, Tolmin, Slovenia, 1999