

# Tokyo Haiku Manifesto 1999

A First Step toward World Haiku

## Ban'ya Natsuishi

Haiku has now transcended its role as one Japan's few cultural exports, and has entered a new age in which it must be considered as a poetic genre shared by people all over the world, through which individual poets can freely display their powers of poetic expression.

On July 11, 1999, under the auspices of the Japan Foundation, the Modern Haiku Association sponsored the First International Contemporary Haiku Symposium, which was held in Tokyo at the Kagurazaka Emile. It rained that day, but even so, a total of 161 enthusiastic participants were in attendance. The panelists were as follows: Martin Berner, Secretary of the German Haiku Association and a major voice in the field of experimental haiku; Alain Kervern, who lectures at l'Universite de Bretagne Occidentale, and has published *Le Grand Almanach Poetique Japonais*, a five volume French version of the haiku almanac (*saijiki*), and representing England, Tito, a member of the British Haiku Society. Ban'ya Natsuishi represented Japan, while the moderator was Kan'ichi Abe, Vice-President of the Modern Haiku Association.

A fruitful discussion was held among these panelists from four different countries, and the detailed examination of specific examples of haiku in Japanese, English, German, and French helped to deepen the audience's understanding.

The themes given for discussion were as follows:

What is "contemporary haiku"?

The rhythm of haiku in each panelist's native language

Problems of translating haiku

Through the panel discussion, the following conclusions were reached:

"Season words" are not absolutely necessary for World Haiku.

In addition to "season words", new keywords, which are not related to the seasons and can therefore transcend national boundaries, such as "mother", "war", "sea", "love", and "mountain", will prove effective.

In World Haiku, the greatest emphasis should be placed on the poet's originality.

In any language, the rhythm of haiku should not merely serve to maintain a fixed form. It is necessary to use the linguistic characteristics of each language, such as hard and soft or long and short sounds, in order to create a rhythm that will match the content of the poem.

Because haiku are very short, "cutting words", which indicate a mental leap, can play an important role in giving a poem an added dimension that extends beyond its actual length.

Although translations can never be perfect, excellent translations of excellent poems are absolutely essential for the "internationalization" of haiku.

Haiku is the essence of the beauty of each language, and is therefore a poetic form of vital importance for world culture in the 21st century.

These seven points form the Tokyo Haiku Manifesto 1999.

It is regrettable that, since the discussion focused on fundamental issues concerning haiku in European languages, we were not able to examine the latest poems of each of the four panelists.

Yet even so, the tremendous success of this symposium made it clear that, as we approach the 21st century, haiku will become ever more important to mankind.

But why should this be so? I have thought of the following reasons.

Haiku is a form of expression that comes closest to “silence”, that most fertile realm of the unconscious, and its brevity is its most important characteristic.

Like an incantation, haiku is capable of working powerful magic on the human psyche.

But haiku is not a magic spell grounded in a fixed formula. It is rather a free, open incantation, created by individuals.

The composition of haiku in different languages will shed light on cultural differences and similarities, thereby providing a useful tool for international understanding.

Haiku can be both the most elementary and the most sophisticated form of linguistic expression.

Looking back over history, Japanese contemporary haiku seems to have begun about sixty years ago. Take, for example, the following poem, written in 1938.

War  
stood at the corridor end

Hakusen Watanabe (1913-1969)

This poem is centered around “war”, a non-seasonal keyword shared unhappily by all of humanity. In personifying “war”, this haiku has become an eerily frightening incantation.

Fear, along with joy and sadness, is a universal emotion.

Furthermore, between “war” and “stood at the corridor end”, there is a great mental leap, or “cut”. What supports this “cut” is not the accumulation of technical skill that stretches to the classics, but rather a flight of imagination that took place in one poet’s mind.

Japanese aesthetics is an important foundation of haiku, but the both universality of Hakusen Watanabe’s poem, and the individual imagination that brought it to life, are even more important.

Rather than talking about the “internationalization” of haiku, we should consider haiku as a stimulating form of expression which tests the limits to which individual personalities and the regional cultures in which they are grounded can transcend national boundaries to achieve universality.

N. B. Currently I have no relation with the Modern Haiku Association in Japan.