
A Short Memoir of the 7th WHA Japan Conference

by Hideki Ishikura

The 7th Japan Conference of the World Haiku Association, an incorporated non-profit organization, was held on 29 April 2012 at Itabashi Green Hall, Tokyo. The conference was attended by roughly 30 members, mostly residing in the Tokyo metropolitan area, but some from Nara, Hyogo, and Ehime prefectures.

Inside the conference room, attendees were visually welcomed by 15 haiga artworks, of which 10 were by the WHA Haiga Contest winners and 5 were pieces by the Contest judge Kuniharu Shimizu. Attendees were also welcomed aurally later on at the haiku reading held from 4PM.

The conference commenced at 1PM. The initial speech by Director Ban'ya Natsuishi covered a variety of topics, including the association's activities during 2011, call for submission to the annual anthology *World Haiku Association 2013 No.9*, and the ongoing plan to hold the 7th WHA Conference from 6 to 8 September 2013 in Medellin, Colombia. Medellin is worldly renowned as a city that annually holds large-scale international poetry festivals. For members within and outside of Japan who could not attend the Japan conference, Natsuishi's message can be heard on YouTube in both Japanese and English

Japanese: <http://youtu.be/y0zu0oMNZrE>

English: <http://youtu.be/h-z9oJxDQaQ>

Natsuishi's speech was followed by self-introductions and short comments by each of the attendees. The comments were simply miscellaneous (in the

best sense of the word), with allusions to poetic style, background, belief, etc. Whereas Natsuishi referred haiku to as a genre and not a style, one member asserted that haiku is a platform. Some members were from the free-style school, while others were from the fixed-syllable school. There was a member who started composing haiku in English with rhymes but is now writing in Japanese; there was also a Japanese citizen who composes in English and has published her works in the U.S.; another was a haikist who translates his Japanese haiku into Spanish (not English) for public reading; yet another was me, who writes haiku based on rhythms of classical Chinese poetry. The World Haiku Association by its premise promotes haiku compositions in all languages, but after listening to comments by the attendees, I felt that it is not only the variety of languages that is enriching the world of haiku, but also the variety of haikists' assertions that they take pride in.

Following the self-introductions, the announced proceedings were expedited in order: summary report of the 2nd Tokyo Poetry Festival & the 6th World Haiku Association Conference, which was administratively undertaken by the WHA, publication of *World Haiku Association 2012 No.8*, projected publication of *World Haiku Association 2013 No.9*, promotion of the WHA Haiga Contest, and the accounting report of the WHA. The proceedings were rounded off by Natsuishi's report on attending the 21st International Poetry Festival of Medellin, Colombia, and the 1st Asia Pacific Poetry Festival, Vietnam and Sayumi Kamakura's account of attending the 7th Kritya International Poetry Festival, India.

From 3PM, we had the honor of inviting Sukehiro Hirakawa, Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo and renowned specialist of comparative cultural history, for his lecture titled "The World and Haiku." Hirakawa has numerous publications in comparative cultural history, e.g., *Poems of the Renaissance*, *Koizumi Yakumo: Dream of Escaping the West*, *Lafcadio Hearn: Colonization, Christianization, and Civilization*, *Discourse on Dante's "Divine Comedy,"* etc. As such his academic interest and vast knowledge spread across a large field, but for our conference, we asked him to focus his lecture on how Japan's haiku was introduced to the rest of the world.

Hirakawa's lecture started off by looking at how Japanese haiku were translated by different people who introduced haiku to the outside world. One of the first main figures who had translated a number of Japanese haiku into

English was Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo). Though I knew this fact, I was amazed at the professor's explanation on how Hearn was initially attracted to Japanese haiku. Before coming over to Japan, Hearn had spent two years in Martinique, situated in the Caribbean Sea, and took interest in the Creole language spoke by descendants of African slaves. It was then thought that Creole was a bastardized version of French, lacking its own alphabet and reformed grammar, and had almost no appeal in the then-academia. However, Hearn found Creole proverbs, idioms, ghost stories, and folklores to be greatly interesting, and took effort to collect and record them. When Hearn arrived in Japan, he did the same. Hearn was mesmerized by how animals such as donkeys, monkeys, frogs, and cicadae (*sémi*), all of which are not common poetic subjects in the West, have long served as important poetic matters in Japanese tanka and haiku. Frogs were considered to be grotesque creatures in the West, biblically seen as familiars of devils; cicadae (*sémi*) were merely noisy bugs even to Pierre Loti and Basil Hall Chamberlain, both of whom have resided in Japan during the Meiji era. In contrast, Hearn felt the humming of cicadae to be pleasant. Moreover, he was turned on by the idea of trying to find out how Japanese people were "feeling" about frogs, dragon flies, butterflies, and other creatures that were not too typical in Western poems. Along this line, he collected and translated a large number of haiku. Here are two examples.

Even the camphor-tree to quake with the clamor of *sémi*! (Baijyaku)
In the hour of heaviest heat, how simmers the forest with *sémi*! (Roei)

As cicadae do not exist in England, the usual English translation of the insect has been "cicada," directly derived from Latin, but Hearn had decided to use the Japanese word "*sémi*", given the difference in the species of the insect in the West and in Japan.

Hirakawa's lecture then went on to translations of haiku and introduction to the West by Chamberlain, who was inspired by his friend Hearn, the first French haiku publication by Paul-Louis Couchoud, Julien Vocance's French haiku depicting the dismal scenes of the First World War, Ezra Pound's imagist movement inspired by the haiku, contributions by Reginald Blyth towards introduction of Japanese haiku to the West (Blyth happens to be

Hirakawa's teacher), Shinto's influence on the haiku, etc... the different topics crisscrossed all planes and were not only backed up by literary citations but by witty jokes that amused the entire conference room. While listening to the lecture, Hearn's curiosity and inquiring mind that were not blemished by established Western values overlapped with my image of Matsuo Basho, who constantly viewed things with his own eyes, thought with his own mind, and walked a step ahead of other haikists during his time. Though I reviewed too much on the topic of Hearn, Hirakawa's entire lecture could be heard on YouTube in Japanese.

<http://youtu.be/mmUaI-bGvow>

The lecture ended with Hirakawa's reading of his 8 haiku paying homage to Natsuishi's *Flying Pope*. Shin Sasakubo accompanied the reading by his guitar improvisation, and the reading brought out a lot of excitement from the audiences. 3 of his haiku are as follows.

The flying Pope - / the glamorous / today's first sunrise of the year
With Japanese and English haiku as wings / the phoenix / ascends to heaven
Reading Ban'ya Natsushi / the flying Pope / plummets from the sky

The final event of the conference was per usual the haiku reading session by the members. 19 haikists participated in the reading, each embraced with Sasakubo's guitar accompaniment. Below are the haiku by the 19 readers, in order, 1 haiku taken from each reader's presentation.

A freezing goldfish / floating / on the bottom of the sky (Hideki Ishikura)
Eating the cast-off shell of winter / a bush warbler / chirps (Saki Inui)
The old year and the new year / god's fingers / spin the globe in space
(Houbu Umesawa)
A grain of sand / is the true color / of the sunset (Sayumi Kamakura)
A cutlass fish / flashing jump out of a tub / at a fish market
(Tatsunori Koizumi)
The sea was made / from snivel that / God dropped (Izumi Sato)
A spring drizzle / melts away / into a sutra chant (Fumiko Saotome)

Kilauea - / Pele's children echo / the night marchers' chants
 (Rosalind Harris. Read by Kuniharu Shimizu)
 A bike speeds away / splashing lotus seeds / around (Maki Starfield)
 cross lonely legs (Yu Soneda)
 Lettuce / bursting into bud / at the back of the sun (Yuko Tange)
 Devouring the wind / a carp streamer / in metabolic syndrome
 (Tadato Nakatsuka)
 A leaf of Paulownia / Dying the hill of rubble / With tiny color
 (Hiroshi Nagatsuka)
 The flying Pope / stuck by / a thousand needles (Ban'ya Natsuishi)
 El camello / al jalarla / se va hacienda manta (Yutaka Hasegawa)
 The luckiest pick from a sacred lot - / the pain of a hand / thrust into cold
 bucket water (Maki Ohsato)
 A Siamese dog / cut in half - / one eats the other (Kika Hotta)
 Wheelchairs / Penetrate into the forest / Bringing stunning brightness
 (Hideaki Matsuoka)
 Wind's current / within the blue of the shadow / of a tiny bottle
 (Ichitaro Yamamoto)

English translation by Kika Hotta