

DRAGONFLY IN *HAIKU**

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A short introductory note on *haiku*, covering history and principles of this poetic form, with emphasis on dragonflies as a special seasonal theme, is followed by 3 dragonfly *haiku* written by the author.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF *HAIKU*

In the history of Japanese poetry *haiku*-like expressions are found in all periods, gradually crystallizing into the present form. In early 8th-century poetry contests a question-and-answer game developed in a formal setting: a pair of *katauta* (a question and the answer to it) constituting the poem. The question, simple, direct, spontaneous, one breath long, counted 17 to 19 syllables, and the answer was an immediate witty response in the same style. This ancient poetic form, after having undergone many metamorphoses, eventuated into the *haiku* (YASUDA, 1982, p. 111).

In order to understand this development the *tanka* (from the 2nd half of the 8th century) should be mentioned: a well-defined form (five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables) with clearly structured contents: a prominent pause after the third line divides it into an "upper" and a "lower" hemistich. The *tanka* pattern gave rise to an independent first hemistich, 5-7-5, which in its turn led to *renga* or chained verse. In *renga* two persons compose one poem, one writing the first hemistich and the other, the second. This too was done in poetry contests. The name *renga* does not appear until 1127 AD, but older attempts are found in the *Manyōshū* (8th century). Rather than poetry this was mannered amusement. Later, in the 13th

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century, long *renga*, extending to one hundred links were written, in which the classical poetical atmosphere returned that was typical of the sober *tanka*. The opening verse of the *tanka* — the *hokku* — has a 5-7-5 pattern. Its function was to summarize the tone and atmosphere of the poem. It was considered a great honour to be delegated the task of composing the *hokku*, and many persons have practised writing them. A separate name for such single *hokku* dates from 1461: "*kanjo hokku*".

The humorous *renga* (*haikai no renga*) was a reaction to the complicated rules governing *renga* composition. The word *haikai* first appeared in the *Kokinshū* (905 AD), a collection of verses which became famous in the 15-16th century.

In the *uta-awase* (poetry tournament) composition around a special theme was practised. Many poems composed on such occasions must have been trivial to the extreme — a mere naming of objects of nature in conformity with the rules of the contest, which was a fashionable pastime since the 9th century. One of these rules was that there should be a correspondence between the time of composition and the season mentioned in the *hokku* of *renga*, because such correspondence will help the poet to be in harmony with nature. Seasonal themes were not found in *hokku* until Sōgi (± 1450) listed suitable themes per month. His suggestions, however, were ignored by his successors, when the long *renga* was superseded by the humorous "*haikai no renga*", (characterized by freedom of choice of subject matter and the use of colloquial language). Bashō (*nom de plume* for Matsuo Kinsaku), one of the outstanding *haiku* poets (1644-1694), however, did not attach much importance to seasonal themes; he insisted that only the poet's character and purity could produce good *haiku*, and he was more interested in the insight itself — not in hair-splitting wrangling over words. It is clearly winter or summer, from the meaning of the verse; there is no need for discussion.

With Shiki (1866-1902) the independence of the 17-syllable initial verse of *renga* was formally recognized and *haiku* ceased to be regarded as a part of a longer form.

What began as a simple naming of natural objects in the early *tanka* period came to yield the richness of image found in the *Shin-Kokinshū* (13th century). The unity of the *renga*, arisen from the intuitive relationship between the links, the "*hon-i*"¹, lent to the seasonal element of the *hokku* a depth of reference which found its ultimate expression in some of Bashō's *hokku*. The seasonal image became more finely differentiated by the standards he set and has never disappeared since. Several forms of this poetic art were developed in the course of time, some more liberal, others more restricted, depending on the period, but the characteristic length of 17 syllables successfully resisted all attempts to change it.

¹ *Hon-i* means the "heart of things", the intuitive connections as the basis for all the linking in *renga*. In modern critics' view: all elements are immovable, no substitutions can be made; such quality can only spring from a deep and genuine insight. Attempts at cleverness result in triviality.

CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF *HAIKU*

A *haiku* is a short rhymeless poem, usually written in 3 lines, of 5, 7 and 5 syllables², respectively (i.e. the maximum number of syllables that can be uttered with ease in one breath), and which is frugal and suggestive in the choice of words.

Haiku, has mainly a positive mood. I would like to illustrate this with the following example: Bashō was asked for a comment upon a *haiku* by Kikaku, one of his pupils:

*Darting dragonfly
pull off its wings, and look
crimson pepper pod.*

Bashō warned: "In this verse life is destroyed", and proposed to turn the lines around:

*Crimson pepper pod
add two pairs of wings, and look
darting dragonfly.*

A subtle, fine-spun wisdom in 17 syllables can be a fine aphorism, but it is not a *haiku* unless there is emotion, thrill, the experience of sudden insight, the "*haiku*-moment", that moment of absolute intensity when the poet's grasp of intuition is complete, that moment in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself become one. This act of vision or intuition is physically a state of concentration or tension of the mind, which is sustained until it finds exactly the right words. This state of tension lasts one breath: as the poet breathes out, he draws the *haiku*-moment to its close and his vision is completed. *Haiku* poetry is not governed by intellectual concepts or rationalism, nor is it made: — it comes. Or, it does not come yet: — the poet can only wait in patience, his mind ready for surprise and open to silence.

The basis of every *haiku* is a particularly intense experience, perceived sharply, not superficially through the eyes of convention, prejudice or tradition. It might seem that only a Zen monk has the chance to succeed, but nothing is less true. Common things, observed in silent wonder, create an emotion, without telling. As Isoji ASO (1955, p. 237) expressed it: "The attitude of the *haiku* poet is to find the way of art in the common modes of living".

The Japanese nature symbolism is of particular importance. A text as:

*Amidst high reeds
rustling of dragonfly wings
then the splash of a frog.*

is incorrect, since the frog is a symbol of spring, while the dragonfly represents summer or autumn; their mutual association would therefore imply a contradiction.

In the concise *haiku* form each word must be in the right place, there is no room for descriptions or details and, as Bashō taught, "not a single word should be carelessly used". Therefore the stillness in the empty space around the verse also counts. Much is left to the reader. Reading *haiku* is an art in itself, a state of readiness, which can only be acquired by patience and awareness. Enjoying reading *haiku* comes intuitively and immediately rather than through logical reasoning. One should not read a whole collection at one go ("one *haiku* a day!").

² In fact, Japanese poets do not count "syllables", they count "*onji*" (sound symbols). The term *onji* refers to one of the phonetic characters used in Japanese phonetic script, representing an open syllable, or syllable with short vowel, much simpler than most syllables in e.g. English or German, in which an average 17-syllable *haiku* lasts about 60% longer than traditional Japanese *haiku* (HIGGINSON, 1985).

DRAGONFLY AS A SEASONAL THEME AND SYMBOL IN CHINA AND JAPAN

To the Japanese, man is a part of nature, and the seasons are visible in the objects of nature. A red dragonfly is autumn; dragonflies when unqualified, are summer. They do not merely suggest or imply summer — they contain it, they incorporate it; the object and the season coincide. The Japanese concept of man's relation with nature finds a perfect expression in Bashō's poetry, but also in Japanese landscape gardening, certain schools of painting, the art of flower arrangement.

The general features of dragonfly "folklore" based on dragonfly morphology and behaviour were briefly outlined by KIAUTA-BRINK (1976, pp. 147-149, 150).

Much of the culture of the Korean and the Japanese has come from China, and the treatment of the dragonfly in literature, painting and popular belief by the Japanese resembles that by the Chinese. For the Chinese poets and painters the dragonfly is a popular motif. It is an emblem of summer. It is sometimes known as the typhoon fly, owing to the presence of the insects in large numbers before a storm (cf. FRASER, 1918). The Chinese believe that the insects are excited and impregnated by the wind. Hence the written form for "wind" contains the character *ch'ung* (insect). In general to the Chinese, dragonflies are a symbol of instability and weakness (WILLIAMS, 1976). The eyes of certain species are said to change into pearls under certain conditions (READ, 1977, p. 73) and the dragonflies are widely used in medicine (YANG, 1976).

In Japan, dragonflies symbolize happiness and victory, they are thought to be brave and strong, and they were used as a motif for decoration of helmets during the Tokugawa shōgunate period (17th century).

While no ancient names referring to dragonflies seem to occur in the West, the insects have a history and folklore of their own in the Far East. An ancient name for Japan is "*Akitsu-shima*" (the island of the dragonfly), derived from its resemblance in shape to a dragonfly (or, as some say, from its abundant harvests: *aki* means "autumn", also "harvest"; *akitsu-mushi* means "autumn insect").

In the first Government-compiled History of Japan, the *Nihon-Shoki*, 720 AD, there are two well-known episodes concerning emperors and dragonflies (ASAHINA, 1974). It was the first Emperor, Jimmu, who said that the province of Yamato looked like "a dragonfly licking its tail" (cleaning its ovipositor, or transferring sperm to the accessory genitalia); later, the whole main island was likened to a dragonfly, which became the emblem of the Japanese Empire.

Verses about dragonflies have been written in Japan for over fourteen centuries. The oldest poem known was composed by the Emperor Yūryaku, almost 1500 years ago. While hunting he was bitten in the arm by a gadfly, which was immediately devoured by a dragonfly. The Emperor wrote an ode in its honour,

calling it the "loyal" dragonfly, and named the main island Yamato "land of the dragonfly".

The Japanese speak of the queer propensity of the dragonfly to return many times in succession to a spot that it has chosen as its perch. They believe that injuring the insects unnecessarily brings bad luck, because of its relation to the dead: certain dragonflies are believed to be ridden by the dead (*shoryo-tombo*: dragonfly of the ancestral spirits; *shorai-tombo*: dragonfly of the dead, cf. SAROT, 1958).

A kind of dragonfly larva, called *magoraro-mushi*, is said to be famous throughout Japan and used as a remedy against diseases of children; some libellulid species are sold as remedy against throat inflammation and as febrifuge (ASAHINA, 1974).

Encouraged by HENDERSON (1934) who wrote: "Although the *haiku* form is peculiarly Japanese, I believe most strongly that it has characteristics which transcend the barriers of language and nationality", I here present three *haiku* of my own, inspired by the ever-intriguing dragonflies.

*On its empty skin
not yet strong enough to fly
flimsy dragonfly.*

*Radiant sunlight
caught in gauze dragonfly wings
twinkles in colours.*

*Dragonfly eyes
on both sides of a grass stem
watching intruders.*

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