



OIDEYASU!

FIVE-SEVEN-FIVE

A Life Written in Haiku Poems

Jackie J. Kim

Hawai'i Herald Columnist

The Japanese pride themselves on their four distinct seasons. Each season has its special foods, rituals and festivals and the arrival of a new season brings a sense of anticipation.

Of the four seasons, spring is one of Kyōto's most beautiful. The frosty winter days give way to the celebrated cherry blossoms that last only a couple of days, attracting viewers and admirers from around the world. Predicting the full bloom makes the anticipation that much more exciting, and viewing the blossoms at their most beautiful all the more precious. Longing, waiting and anticipation . . .

Many attempt to capture these emotions and the fleeting moment in short poems with just a few, appropriate words. The Japanese poetry style most known throughout the world is the five-seven-five-syllable form called haiku. The point is to say little, but to choose the right words that give power and life to a certain image.

In our American culture, the ability to express oneself and be articulate is a positive characteristic. The person who talks the most and tells interesting and witty stories is usually the life of the party. In Japan, however, wordiness and talkativeness is considered more a negative than a positive trait. Saying a few words about one's daily experiences and allowing mutually understood emotions and implications to complete the communication is how 82-year-old Funakoshi Waka explains the essence of Japanese haiku. This form of poetry gained popularity and recognition through the famous poet, Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694). Its five-seven-five syllables that depict experiences with the seasons, time and landscape through clever wordplay have gained popularity worldwide.

Funakoshi-san, who is my neighbor, has been writing and collecting haiku poems for the past 30 years. Born in the countryside of Ichihara, Kyōto, she married into the Funakoshi family, which has a long history in northern Kyōto, dating back to the Edo Period. Last year, at the age of 81, Funakoshi-san published her first book, a collection of poems titled "Bara no Ame," or "Rain of Roses." The title of her book captures her love for roses. Indeed, the flower is considered one of the most beautiful. But it is also personally meaningful to Funakoshi-san, as one of her closest friends gives her a bouquet of roses every year for her birthday. Funakoshi-san said imagining a "rain of roses" makes her smile for its beauty and scent. She emphasized that words that trigger the imagination, bringing together thoughts and senses, are the very essence of haiku.

Funakoshi-san's book contains some of the most memorable moments of her life, captured in 17 syllables, spanning from Showa 50 (1975) to the present. The 200-page book contains 400 poems — a collage of her personal life: events, memories, moments, images and thoughts. The pages reveal life's sometimes-simple moments, such as an ordinary task in the kitchen or an impressive landscape view.

Other poems express the sudden news of her husband's terminal illness and the shock of his death. The images etched in her mind are made permanent through the words she selects. The combination of words and expressions depict a scene and relate it to a particular emotion that comes to life in her mind and then is transferred



Funakoshi Waka points out that spring, summer, fall and winter are the basis of haiku poems, but the ambiguity of the in-between when one season is in the process of becoming another also gives great inspiration.

to the readers' thoughts. The words are simple, the occasion very familiar, and the emotion can be both a subtle warm feeling of a shared knowing or a powerful realization after a repeated read. For example, she cited, "Yudōfu ni / atata-mareru / waga inochi — My life / is warmed / by boiled tōfu."

Yudōfu, a popular winter dish, is tōfu that is simmered and then dipped in a tangy lemon soy sauce before eating. The word *inochi* is translated as "life," but it also means "life force" or "life span." Although the words are simple, there is detail in the nuance; one surmises that it is a cold winter and the healthy tōfu dish brings warmth and comfort as well as a general feeling of contentment in living.

Funakoshi-san explains that haiku is *kigo* written in the Chinese characters *ki* for "seasons," and *go* for "words." One must refer to the distinction of the four seasons through various indirect forms of weather, flowers, plants or environmental atmosphere.

Funakoshi-san pointed out that spring, summer, fall and winter are the basis of haiku poems, but the ambiguity of the in-between when one season is in the process of becoming another also gives great inspiration. The transition, for example, from winter to spring is called *harutonari*, which is literally translated as "spring adjacent." It is the time when the biting cold of winter calms and fresh, crisp morning air hints at a delicate scent of *kinmokusei* (fragrant olive). It is an unspoken innate knowing that newness, birth and awakening is not yet here, but indeed near. Barren tree branches become a richer brown in color and texture, as if slowly defrosting from their time of rest and stillness. Tiny buds formed tight in a small ball line the once-skinny lifeless bark. They peek out, ever so shy, biding their time to make their grand entrance. Funakoshi-san explains that a good haiku poem relates one's own subjective ideas and impressions by choosing the right words as well as a harmonizing clever usage of Chinese characters. When a reader ponders these words and the understanding and realization evokes a certain

emotion, the poem has meaning and power.

Funakoshi-san says she encountered haiku by chance when she was asked to join the mothers' haiku club at her daughter's junior high school nearly forty years ago. At the time, she never imagined that haiku would become such an important part of her life. It is this passion for words and capturing the fleeting moments that give her every day meaning.

Funakoshi-san laughed quietly, saying, "In my eighty-some years of life, there have been many things. I tried my best to put the good moments and also the not-so-good times in my haiku poems. Even when my husband passed away a couple of years ago, I found myself searching for the right words to write my haiku describing this event."

She looked at me sheepishly. "Do you think that's terrible?" I smiled back at her and shook my head. She continued, "It was as if I stepped out of my self and was watching another person. My husband had just died and I found myself thinking of the words for a haiku that could describe my feelings. I caught myself at that moment in astonishment. I thought human beings can be so emotional and yet so composed and cool."

The months after his death were challenging, especially the first winter. "Ni-n-gatsu / otonaki ie ni / modorikeri — Returning / to a quiet home / in February."

"I wrote this poem almost half a year after my husband died. February in Kyōto is one of the coldest months. There is hardly anyone outside during this freezing time, and inside the home, it is even more silent, especially when my husband was no longer there to greet me. These were the words that came to me one evening as I walked into the very stillness of my empty home." I nodded my head in understanding of the subtlety of the verses. After her husband Yoshiro's death, Funakoshi-san decided to publish the book in his memory, for throughout their many years together, he had encouraged her to continue writing her haiku.

Haiku has become such a part of Funakoshi-san that she said she would probably think of words for her poems until her very last breath. Even then, she said, she would be too busy considering which words would best fit the occasion. We smiled at the irony of the thought.

I asked if she had a poem for the new year and the hopefulness of a new beginning. She thought for awhile and then recited, "Hatsu hi sasu / irie no shinju / bikari ka na — The year's first sunray beams / on the iridescent bay / sparkle like pearls." HH

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about Kim's department head title, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by emailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.