

The Miraculous Power of Language: A Conversation with the Poet Hoshinaga Fumio

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Please also see the accompanying article,
[Hoshinaga Fumio: Selected Haiku from *Kumaso-Ha*](#)
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Introduction

Spending time with Hoshinaga Fumio is like spending time in warm sunshine, as his beaming smile and youthful energy radiate expansively. At seventy, among many literary activities, Hoshinaga leads some dozen haiku circles around our Kumamoto, Kyushu, area. Over a forty-year career he has garnered numerous commendations, and was recently selected as one of 25 national poets in *Haiku Grove: An Anthology of Meritorious Haiku* (*haiku no hayashi*, Honami Shoten, 2003); his knowledge of both modern and traditional haiku is extensive. Along with research interests in Japanese language and history, Hoshinaga has been concerned with the local history and deep tribal past of Central Kyushu, a concern which frames his latest effort, *Kumaso-Ha*, a ninth haiku collection published by Honami Shoten in autumn 2003. The creativity of the haiku in *Kumaso-Ha* are striking: many are innovative in approach, presenting social and philosophical perspectives with deeply humane insight. Most also use *kigo* (though *kigo* with a difference—*kigo* are special "season words" in Japanese haiku) and are written in 5-7-5- or 17-*on* form, echoing haiku verities. Hoshinaga often employs free-meter and orthographic fragmentation to create a fusion of rhythmic elements and psychological concept, a style unique in his work.

We were joined in our conversation by Shinjuku Rollingstone, *haijin*, mutual friend and interpreter, instrumental to our communication. I wish also to thank Shinobu Yamaguchi of Kumamoto University, who produced a draft transcript from the recorded material.

Interview

Richard Gilbert: I'm looking forward to our talk, as readers in English are not familiar with your life and your haiku. Could you say a few words to introduce yourself and your haiku style?

Hoshinaga Fumio: I began studying haiku in 1967, so it's been about forty years now. In the beginning, I learned traditional haiku, following and sticking to, so to speak, a conservative form. At the time I started to write haiku, avant-garde haiku was becoming a major movement. Especially, Kaneko Tôta published the haiku magazine *Kaitei*, and many young people became intensely interested.

In fact, Tôta's soft-cover book, *Today's Haiku* (Kon-nichi no haiku) was something like a bible for young people. From that book, I began to discover *gendai* (modern, contemporary) haiku. I published my first book of haiku after studying and writing for just one year. The title is *100/67* that is, one hundred sixty-sevenths. A "one hundred haiku collection" in '67; 100/67^{ths} in Japanese is called an improper fraction (*kabunsû*), and this term also has another meaning: "big head" [laughs]. And not a proportionally big head, but a big head — out of all proportion. I felt that I wanted to write haiku from my heart, not my head; I thought that my published haiku collections were out of proportion because they were written more from my head. . . . Now I've published nine books of haiku, and I feel I'm getting closer to my heart. That's it.

RG: May I ask, what was your experience as a child, growing up?

HF: I was born in 1933. When I was in the sixth grade of Elementary school, World War Two ended. So until that time, I was a nationalistic, militaristic child in a militaristic environment. After the war, with the advent of democracy, gradually I discovered what I had not been able to see — what had somehow been hidden behind society. That's why I cannot believe anything I see: there must be some hidden meaning. That's the way I grew up. Even though I was writing traditional haiku, I thought there must be something hidden behind it. So, it was very easy for me to shift over to *gendai* haiku.

And, I'm an impoverished tenant-farmer's son. I learned after I had become an adolescent that the wealthy landowner of our farmland was a famous traditional-haiku poet; this circumstance contributed to my despising such a sort of "representative" poet. These are some of the factors that drove me to write *gendai* haiku.

RG: What might be frustrating or dissatisfying about traditional haiku?

HF: Hmm. Not frustration or dissatisfaction, so much as antipathy towards authority and

power.

RG: Do you mean then, that you feel restricted, concerning traditional haiku?

HF: Yes. I have repulsion, revulsion exactly against the formal rules and approach, *kigo*, and various formal necessities. [Reads the first poem from 100/67]:

二十億光年の偽証 お前のB型
ni-ju oku kōnen no gishyō omae no B-gata

twenty billion light-years of perjury: your blood type is "B"

I have a lot of misgivings, so I want to make visible these misgivings in myself. These misgivings are not directed toward typical persons, but rather towards any kind of authority. This kind of repulsion or revulsion drives me to write haiku! [Laughter]

RG: So, in this first haiku, we have the word "perjury" . . .

HF: "Twenty billion light-years" is almost an infinitely long distance ... I had been fooled for so long, concerning any and every fundamental thing — without knowing any fundamental thing in the first place. Blood type B is rare in Japan; Type A is happier, but Type B carries a sense of melancholy. So, I felt my rebelliousness or revulsion could not be not blood-type A — it must be blood-type B.

RG: In North America, we don't really focus on blood types, so it's difficult to grasp the meaning of this haiku. The haiku you mention brings up a different question. In many of your works, such as "twenty billion light years," you create a deep, interior psychological feeling, or seem to allude to a mysterious subject. The power of psychological allusion seems uniquely creative in your work. Could you comment on this theme?

HF: I write about or touch upon human heart and feeling, by creating human mental images. The human mental image does not have a typical form, such as a cake cut into four quarters — a mental picture is not like that — it has no form. For example, though I don't like to talk about this, my mother attempted suicide when I was in my first year of high school. I don't know the reason. This was just an attempt, but in the next week something in her mind or spirit was terribly, unusually troubled, and at the end of that week she passed away. I have mixed feelings — both love and hate. Santōka also lost his mother to suicide. I cannot cut the love and hate apart, separate them. And I cannot tell if this light is bright — is dark. When you eat cake it's bright, but when I get a difficult question — it's getting dark! [Laughter]

So that is why my approach may be very difficult to understand for some people. In any case, there's no doubt psychological influence is an aspect of my work.

Shinjuku Rollingstone [looking at Hoshinaga's first anthology]: *Cho-sen* is written in roman letters. This is challenging in Japanese ... *cho* means butterfly, doesn't it? What does this butterfly mean?

HF: *Cho-sen* is the name of my first major haiku collection. My hometown is named *Sen-cho* — and *cho-sen* means challenges, as in challenging traditional haiku. Also, *cho-sen* means 1,000 butterflies spreading their wings. *Cho-sen* also means "rebellion, provocation" and additionally, *cho-sen* represents the world of beauty and the mixed or "upside-down" (ambivalent) feelings I have towards my hometown — it is also a classic symbol of Japanese beauty. So, I cannot love purely — there is both love and hatred — I'm the kind of man who can't love *that* way. I have loved in a *winding* way.

SR: Is that love and anger, or love and sadness? Love — and, what?

HF: Love and hatred ... This book is dedicated to my wife, who passed away some years prior. To this day: did I love her, didn't I love her? Maybe I loved her, but I'm not sure. Perhaps I didn't really love her.

SR: You — didn't love your wife?

HF: No. I feel deeply sorry.

RG: It seems that, in a mysterious way, through your poetry, ambivalent feelings are fused. From your haiku a deep sense of harmony arises.

HF: Hmm. Thank you for your compliment. At the beginning, I didn't intend to write mysterious haiku! Well, in language words always have an order, and as I mentioned before, there is also ambiguity (ambivalence). The beauty of disharmony may appear — which might seem mysterious in some sense, but perhaps it's not really that mysterious? Disharmonies lead to harmonies.

RG: Disharmonies lead to harmonies — that's very interesting.

HF: Thank you. When I wear clothes, I usually try to coordinate them. However, some people don't do things this way. Lately, in a modern fashion trend, with some skirts one side is short, while the other side is long — but there is harmony: that's interesting.



RG: Now, I'd like to ask two questions regarding your comment, about the disharmony of words. For instance, it seems that in a simple sentence like "The dog is sleeping," we don't have a feeling of disharmony, rather the opposite. But there are different levels; we could say that just by reading this sentence we've made our world a bit darker — we've eliminated various poetic realities as consciousness encounters a literalistic sensibility. In this simple sentence we accept realism. In a way it seems harmonious but perhaps in a sense, realism, or literalism, embodies a kind of disharmony. What do you think?

HF: Yes, I know what you mean: I agree with you. I feel suspicious towards what is generally believed to be right or true — generally.

RG: So, in your poetry, you don't write "the dog is sleeping," — you give us the feeling that something about language is a little uncomfortable — cause us to feel or sense some disharmony in language.

SR: The way your poetic language speaks — it seems that being language is not easy.

HF: This might be. Words (languages) have been overworking themselves. Here is part of the postscript I published in *Cho-sen* (penned in January 1968):

I do not believe the truth that the sea is blue. That I believe it is blue: an encompassing state of affairs that limits as blue, via the comprehension of my eyes: I believe *only* that. Though it is inconvenient, I wish to compose haiku with a free posture towards truth, that is, with reference to the encompassing situation. With this thought, I've been writing haiku freely, selfishly, for half a year. This is the result of my selfish six months. . . . As a matter of fact, there is a vast wilderness of lyricism beyond these haiku: the wilderness I failed to capture with a dull, sleepy-faced rebelliousness. This book reminds me afresh—I must start again with a clean slate and to this end, I cast out this book with good grace.

So, this is the root-principle of my haiku. As a result, my order and usage of words, syntax, etc., will change and diverge from that of ordinary daily usage. I believe it is both such usage and rhythm that makes my haiku well-balanced — even though language is, generally

speaking, overworked, fatigued. In any case, rhythm creates balance and helps readers to understand a haiku. I try to compose in very understandable rhythms. Definitely, in my haiku, rhythm is a very powerful and important element.

SR: Does rhythm help sustain a sense of harmony in your haiku?

HF: Yes. Even though language has been overworked, through it's just my own opinion, I try to create good rhythm and well-balanced haiku. That is why I believe that my haiku have euphony.

SR [to RG]: He has confidence in rhythm in his haiku — that's why English translation is really difficult! [Laughter]

HF [writing on a piece of scrap paper]: I told my grandson, "if you wish to know my work, please remember only this one haiku of mine:"

鳥賊 はっか アカ刑事 放火 金盞花
ika hakka akadeka hōka kinsenka
squid peppermint
Red-detective arson
marigold

[aside: *ika* is squid, *hakka* is peppermint, *akadeka* is a communist detective (perhaps KGB), *hōka* is arson, and *kinsenka* (*Calendula officinalis*) is a large bright-orange marigold, whose petals radiate outward in a striking fashion. It's been pointed out that when praying to ancestors, *kinsenka* may be offered; grilled squid was a special treat (perhaps eaten at an annual festival) during and following the war when people generally, and poor farming families particularly were short on food and there were no available desserts.]

HF: *Ika hakka akadeka hōka kinsenka*. Reading this poem, the rhythm of each word was considered carefully. From the beginning, the first image is "white," then "arson," then "blooming flower." This order or connection yields aesthetic feeling (*bīshiki*), which is pretty strong — but this is just my opinion. Then, "communist," to detective, and then to arson — finally, blooming marigold, perhaps like a fireworks. [Hoshinaga used the onomatopoeic *pa* for blooming, which connotes a "bursting out;" also the words *hana* ("flower") and *hanabi* ("fireworks") are closely related, sharing assonance and a common kanji. Peppermint is a bursting out of flavor, communist-detective (Soviet secret police) implies a bursting out of

revolution and violence; arson, a bursting out of flame and crime; finally, the bursting out of *kinsenka*; each phrase connotes color, from white to red to a metaphoric rainbow.]

As you can see in this haiku, I've been working very hard in creating a sense of euphony. Of course, it might be playful at the same time. One also needs to be shown how to read "detective" (*deka*) as it's an unusual reading of the kanji.

RG: Reading this, first of all, I feel humor: the rhythm is stable, but concept and image are quite disjunctive — it's the rhythm that causes the images join together, creating one world: a sense of coherence. There is also an abstract visual element, which recalls color-field painting. The literal meaning doesn't seem to make sense, yet you can't remove a single element.

HF: That's right. You know, there is the traditional Japanese song "Goodbye Triangle" (which everyone knows) that goes like this: "goodbye = triangle; see you = square; square = tofu; tofu = white; white = rabbit" [*sayonara sankaku, matakite shikaku, shikoku tōfu, tōfu shiroi, shiroi usagi . . .*] — pairs connect by sound, or meaning, or shape, etc. I got the idea from this song. Images are changed one by one, but they also have various connections, at the same time.

These might be just techniques of language, but I believe there is also a sense of aesthetic beauty (*bîshiki*) working within the lines. "Goodbye triangle; see you square; square tofu; tofu white; white rabbit" — each group in this song has a meaningful connection with the following group. No one knows how long the song will continue in this cyclical way. I wanted to somehow adopt the idea into my haiku.

SR: I think your haiku have really got rhythm.

HF: There is rhythm in my haiku — yet, language may be being overworked ...



RG: This question concerns a completely different topic. Since approximately ten percent of Japanese people live in the Tokyo area, and many haiku poets are from that area, could you say something about being a poet of the southern island of Kyushu, and how living in Kyushu and Kumamoto prefecture has influenced your writing?

HF: Haiku is a centralized art. For instance, looking at the *saijiki* (haiku *kigo* or season-

word dictionary), the *kigo* focus only on the Kyoto or Tokyo (Edo) locales. There are no "local" *saijiki*: you cannot find local characteristics. Given such a situation, local people have a sense of inferiority, when regarding the "center" of the tradition.

This type of inferiority-complex provides a kind of energy for my creation. So to "wave a flag" on Kyushu — this is how I assert my existence and identity as a local resident and a living being. The sort of nature that is written in the *saijiki* is fake or false; it's not *real* for me. Real things I feel in Kyushu — no one can take this away — my haiku have arisen from this.

RG: I can't say whether every haiku that you have written has *kigo*, but it seems that most do. So, since *kigo* are found in the *saijiki*, how do you work with them or experience them in composing your haiku?

HF: It is difficult to explain. It's going to be a long story! I believe each haiku represents a slice of life. To make a cross section, you need time, and place, and person. To make a cross section of life, it must be *human*, and have a sense of place and, of course, time. There are reasons why those three things are necessary. First of all, you need "person" to reveal or present a cross section of *life*. Then, you also need to show the place and period (time) in which the person lives. In creating haiku, I want to infuse my work with all three of these elements.

It is necessary to recognize the period in which you live — that is "time." For example, I live now in the Heisei period in Japan, but if I lived in a certain year in the Shōwa period, I would need to recognize the period through myself. One needs awareness or perception of time, or era. And "place:" where do you live, *where do you belong to?*

First, there is perception of time or era; then, where you are, where you are breathing — and then, how do you relate to your era and place — this is the essence of compositional structure or intention; an important matter for a person, and writer.

Kigo is very useful and convenient for creating a sense of place (where) and time (when). For example, take "chrysanthemum," which is *kigo*. "Chrysanthemum" definitely shows a season of autumn. It displays clearly — this is autumn; the time. In the *saijiki*, "chrysanthemum" belongs to autumn. So you can instantly establish the time, "autumn," and also image a place where chrysanthemum is in bloom, for example, a house garden or a garden party. So, chrysanthemum reveals "place" as well. We can say that a *kigo* is just one word — but this one word can speak volumes.

Finally, *how a person lives* in the time and the place; makes a relationship with the time and place — you can describe or express a cross section of life just by identifying "person." I can express a cross section of life with *kigo* — so *kigo* make it much easier to compose haiku.

From this point of view, *kigo* is very useful and symbolic language. This is why ninety percent of my haiku contain *kigo*.

RG: So you don't use *kigo* so much to reflect upon or connect to traditional haiku, but more because *kigo* have a kind of poetic power, the capacity to evoke the elements you've mentioned ...

HF: Yes, *kigo* describes "what" and where I am. This is *kigo's* power or energy.

RG: So, *kigo* carry a sense of environment, a sense of location in time and space . . . When I look at this poem we translated into English,

逃げ水へ戦後の父を追いつめる
nigemizu e sengo no chichi wo oitsumeru

toward the mirage of water
the postwar fathers
chasing after . . .

the *kigo* we translated is mirage: "mirage of water," and as you were saying, it gives a tremendous power to the haiku. Though in English we can't say specifically what this *kigo* means — we don't have reference to a standard *saijiki*) in English — yet it seems a central image. In any case, in traditional Japanese haiku, this *kigo* would never be used in the way you have used it.

HF: Yes, this use of *kigo* is more of a symbolic element.

RG: That's what I was musing about earlier, in terms of finding allusion in your oeuvre. This *kigo* doesn't seem realistic, as in realism.

SR: You feel *kigo* through your heart (inner sense), not through seeing, touching, and so on.

HF: Yes. You have to experience the *kigo*. If you have never experienced "mirage of water" in your life, you can't have written this haiku. I've had a lot of experiences with mirages of water! That is why I can write this haiku! Especially, while I'm driving ... [laughter]

When I was small, "mirage of water" was very mysterious. I wondered what the forward movement was, but it never reached an end. I've had this kind of experience. I have *real* experience, *real* experience of *kigo*. This is why I can write haiku. It seems that I make haiku

with my brain, but I can say I make *kigo* with my *real* experience, my sense of reality.

RG: Yes, not from having looked up a *kigo* in the *saijiki* — for instance: "Oh, today is April so-and-so, I'd better find a spring *kigo* to use in my haiku." You don't have that kind of process.

HF: Absolutely not. Never! I've just written this haiku:

はりもって 輝く 肉体のポルトガル
hari motte kagayaku nikutai no porutogaru

with a needle sparkling the metaphysical flesh of Portugal

There is no *kigo*. I like this haiku, but because there is no *kigo*, it doesn't have a sense of scenery — there is no background behind this haiku. If haiku has *kigo*, it can also show its background scene or time. However, if a haiku doesn't have *kigo*, as in this case, you cannot see the background. There is no environment — just naked haiku — naked myself, in this haiku. I like it, but I don't write this kind of haiku very much.

RG: So, for English speakers — we don't have a *saijiki* or a long history of *kigo*, centralized *kigo*, or season words concerning nature that are directly related to earlier literature. In English, *kigo* is usually something not human (or human associated), something from the natural world — a flower, weather, seasonal image — some kind of environmental image, or seasonal reference.

HF: Yes, I've read many Japanese-translated English-language haiku, and I often feel that they are naked, without a background, such as we've discussed, as haiku, in my feeling.

RG: However, we recently translated an English-language haiku into Japanese, and it had four *kigo*, one from each season in it!

HF: Ha-ha! Well you know, you can find the same kind of haiku in Japanese!

SR: I know a Japanese *haijin*, Kennosuke Tachibana, who likes using double-*kigo*. He just wants to express as much as he can.

HF: I know what he means.

RG: So, because we use simply a seasonal reference or image in English — do you think

that using a seasonal reference is important in English-language haiku composition — though, strictly speaking, this use is not what is meant as *kigo* in Japanese haiku? It seems as though you're suggesting that an environmental quality is really quite important, and it arrives through *kigo*. Would you recommend methods which convey, if not nature, a sense of "environment" behind the haiku?

HF: Yes, using a seasonal reference may be a good hint or suggestion for an English-language haiku writer, but sometimes you have to write naked.



RG: Traditionally, haiku are associated with nature. Do you think this connection is important in *gendai* haiku?

HF: Yes, the Japanese sense of nature is in harmony, or the harmony of — person (human being) and nature [— no separation —] in its widest sense. Without the sense of harmony with nature, Japanese literature would become very weak. So to write about nature — from that position — embodies traditional haiku, and my position is the same.

RG: This brings up a question, in terms of the sense of, or need, for harmony. Are there now challenges, living in our industrial, technological world, in terms of writing honestly about nature in haiku?

HF: Is this a question about haiku specifically, or more a question regarding social problems and conditions?

RG: I think perhaps it could be a problem for haiku, specifically regarding relating with nature, and more generally, any genre of poetry which takes nature as its subject.

HF: This involves *kotodama shinkô*, the miraculous power of language: something that is worshiped in Japan.

RG: Oh, really? Could you say more?

HF: There is a saying: "There are eight million Japanese gods." In any aspect of nature, gods exist. For instance, there is a tree close to this neighborhood — a tree known as *ichirigi*. A sacred rope surrounds the base of the tree. Even in the tree a god exists; so we worship this

tree. I don't describe just the tree, but rather the tree infused with spirit: this involves *kotodama*. I do not want to use the word just for describing "as it is," but want to touch behind the word, further, deeper.

RG: The energy or miraculous power behind the word — language, the word can carry that power ...

HF: Even when I compose a strongly imagistic (pictorial) haiku, I want to create a haiku in which the reader can feel more than a *shasei* (realist sketch). A deeper perspective. Is this enough of an answer to your question? I have been seeking something beyond the merely sketched (described) thing

RG: Yes, thank you. How can we be sincere to our world, and still write about nature as "pure" or beautiful? I can mention two examples: if we write about a beautiful dawn, which is also a polluted sky, or that nearby mountain which now happens to have a microwave tower — it seems that the spirit or energy of nature is somewhat destroyed in that place.

HF: I can answer the question in this way. You meant, when you see the beautiful dawn, you also find destruction in it, didn't you? Well, I could say that I want to rehabilitate nature using *kotodama*.

RG: That's what I was wondering, because I feel just such a power in your poetry.

HF: Thank you very much. There are many ways to protect nature, or rehabilitate nature — for instance, social movements. But in my case, I am a professional of language, so I want to rehabilitate nature with language.

RG: Maybe also, you want to rehabilitate language with nature?

HF: Yes, definitely! And to rehabilitate nature with language. I think contemporary American Indians may also act in a similar regard. They have been able to preserve and revive their ruined world in the American continent through the propagation of language — through *kotodama*. I feel some resonance with contemporary American Indian culture. Now they are reviving their language, and through this, associations with nature. Reviving a sense of their real culture.

I mean, their voice has been greatly destroyed to date, yet they still have faith in their own beliefs, like a kind of animism, incorporated within their own original language. I think they are re-creating (re-making) what they have lost, certain aspects of their culture. You know, here in Kyushu, the Kumaso, the ancient tribe of central Kyushu, have been conquered and eradicated, but in my haiku, I want to rebuild, revive the Kumaso world: the era of the Kumaso and the essential nature of the Kumaso.

SR: I have a question. I was born and grew up in Kumamoto, Kyushu, but I have no idea who my ancestors are. I don't think that people in Kyushu have a Kumaso identity or are conscious of the Kumaso tribe. That is, I recognize that I belong, as an inhabitant of Kumamoto or Kyushu, but "Kumaso" seems a different world which exists only as a myth to me.

HF: This is because you are influenced, even polluted, by the centralized "Tokyo" culture.

SR: Really?

HF: Kumaso culture has been totally ignored in contemporary school education. The Ainu people have abandoned their culture by learning Japanese in the public educational system. In a similar way, I think the Kumaso people renounced Kumaso culture. In any case, it is true that we lost Kumaso culture, but we may still have something that originally came from the Kumaso, for example, words from the Kumaso dialect. You know, we can find the sound of *kuma* even now, like *Kuma-gun* (Kuma county) and *Kumagawa* (Kuma River), which implies that Kumaso culture still remains. I feel something painful in my bones, which is caused by the conquest and defeat of the Kumaso by the Yamato. We were forced to Japanize and become Yamato, just like the Ainu have been Japanized. I want to rehabilitate or resurrect our abandoned culture and nature somehow.

SR: It's — very interesting!



RG: Could you discuss your new anthology, *Kumaso-Ha* in this regard?

HF: *Kumaso-Ha* is a kind of challenge to rehabilitate the beaten tribes of history. To make a long story short, *Kumaso-Ha* is my challenge to resurrect ourselves, who were conquered by the Yamato, through the use of language. [*Kumaso-Ha* has multiple references, as the name of an ancient tribe of central Kyushu, Hoshinaga's school of haiku, and a quality of haiku spirit.] You know, the people of Kumamoto prefecture may have hardly ever considered, or would even believe, that their ancestors were conquered by the Yamato.

However, it is possible to say that this is true — we were conquered by other people. When Japan invaded Korea, Koreans were forced to speak Japanese, so there is still strong anti-

Japanese sentiment. The same situation must have occurred to the Kumaso as well.

SR: Do you know the people of Amami Island, Kagoshima? They were not allowed to use more than one kanji character for their family names. People in Okinawa or Amami also have the strong feeling that their cultural ancestry was ruined or destroyed by the Yamato.

HF: Yes, that's true.

SR: I don't know if people in Kyushu have got that kind of feeling. It may depend on which generation you ask.

HF: I think people in Kumamoto may be pretty tolerant or generous in a sense, but people in Kagoshima believe that they were conquered.

SR: Didn't they think they won a victory against the early Meiji-period government? [The samurai rebellion portrayed in *The Last Samurai* radiated from the southernmost Kyushu prefecture of Kagoshima.]

HF: [Laughs.] No! They surely think they were defeated. Because they believe their ancestors were defeated; I think this is the direct cause of the Hayato tribe [Kagoshima samurai] rebellion.

SR: I feel I'm a citizen of Kumamoto who has the character of the Kumamoto area, a so-called *higo mokkosu*, but I doubt I'm a Kumaso.

HF: [Laughs.]

SR: So, we are saying that the Satsuma (a.k.a. Kagoshima) people descend from the Hayato tribe, while Kumamoto people descend from the Kumaso tribe; and these were two different cultures. Contemporary Kagoshima people will say of each other, "you are of the Satsuma-Hayato tribe." They have that Hayato identity. As a Kumamoto person, I don't have Kumaso identity, but, Hoshinaga-sensei, I think you do.

HF: I was born near Yatsushiro [about an hour's highway drive south of Kumamoto]; this was on the road of return that the victorious Yamato warriors took after they conquered the Kumaso. It was on this road that the *shiranui* [a mysterious fire rising from the ocean] was seen. So, some people may think the Yatsushiro area does not belong to Kumaso anymore. The definition of the Kumaso area is a matter of concern for me. In any case, Kumamoto culture has been conquered by the center. So I would like to be a *Kumaso-Ha!*

RG: So, it seems that the center — the centralized concept or category — is a kind of death: gray, dark: centralized ideas, centralized opinions. The heart of poetry, by contrast, is unique,

creative action.

HF: Well, haiku bows to centralization generally. So, I don't know about you, but I'm holding out against this trend — I don't care at all about the center.



RG: Why did you become a haiku poet?

HF: I don't think I'm a *haijin*, because I may be a *haijin*: maimed person! [Hoshinaga is punning on a kanji-variant homonym] [Laughs] When I'm asked about my job, I am unwilling to say "I'm a *haijin*." You know, there are *kajin*, which means "*haijin*" as a job title. When I write articles for newspapers, you know I can say I'm a *kajin* or *haijin*. However, I don't really like using *haijin* for my professional work. And I'm still not sure if I've become a *haijin* or not. I had wanted to be a literary artist since I was a child. I had always wanted to write something.

During much of my career, when I was teaching in school, I was unable to write longer pieces. So, early on, I wrote a radio drama about Santôka, *Ushiro sugata no shigure te yukuka* [the title is taken from among the most-famous of Santôka's free-style haiku]:

a retreating figure: rain drizzling off and on

which won a prize. This was some time before he became famous [Kumamoto was Santôka's home for some years]. It was not very common to write about Santôka or produce radio drama at that time. Then I was asked by the professional theater group of Kumamoto City to write a play. It was titled *Kiki-mimi kôjintô* ["Listening to the Speech of Kôjintô." *Kojin-san* is a *kami* of western Japan, with local manifestations].

Actually this play was interesting, I'm not sure if you know this or not, but the *senain no eki* (the main historic samurai rebellion) occurred in year ten of the Meiji period. Before this event there was the *jinpuren*, another rebellion, which was instigated by the rebel group known as *fuheibunshi*, just right here, in Kumamoto. You know there is the *sakurayama* shrine around the corner from here, which was built and founded in remembrance of the *fuheibunshi*. The *kôjintô no ran* [kôjintô rebellion], which was the original material of my play, occurred just after the *seinan no eki* and attempted *jinpuren* coup d'état.

But, the *kôjintô no ran* did not actually quite happen, as the group was stopped before they could commit their action. They prayed to the god *kojin-san*, and tried to rebel utilizing the god's power, receiving messages from the god, which was, by the way, very similar to the *jinpuren* idea or belief. Although it was a small group, they were eager to change society, and remarkably, allowed farmers to join. Because I myself am the son of a tenant farmer, I wrote a script which focused on the farmers in the group. I like the play very much. As you can see, I had wanted to write something for long time.

As a high school teacher, I found that teaching haiku to young people was very difficult. Haiku had become "senior citizen" literature, and it was very difficult to teach this "senior citizen" genre! If I said *kareyama ni hi no ataritaru* ("there is the sunshine on the barren mountain"), my students wouldn't understand such a haiku. So, I decided to study haiku on my own. By composing original haiku, I was able to teach in a more inviting way. This was the beginning. It was for this reason that I joined the traditional (*dentô*) haiku group, to begin with.

After six months, I became bored with traditional haiku! Sometime after I became bored, I found a *gendai* haiku group in Kumamoto and joined them. *Gendai* haiku enabled me to express all of my ideas or unclear thoughts and feelings. And so I discovered, "Oh, I can write! I can devote myself and my life!" Since that time, I have been composing haiku.

RG: I wonder, since you could have written, simply, contemporary poetry, why did you keep your focus on the genre of contemporary haiku? Was it because you were very inspired by haiku, or because it was simply the best possible form for poetic composition?

HF: Well, I wrote contemporary poetry also. I wrote both *gendai* haiku and contemporary poetry. I'm not if your American audience is aware of this, but in Japanese literature, there is a kind of caste system of poetry. At the top is contemporary poetry (*shi*), followed by tanka, then haiku, then senryu.

RG: Is this still true?

HF: Yes, to an extent. Haiku will probably never be seen at the same equal level as *shi*. However, *gendai* haiku has been getting more popular, so it is now considered to be at a higher level than tanka. [Laughter] The traditionalist order has remained, basically, unchangeable. At any rate, I thought it was amusing and never agreed with that sort of ranking and, further, wasn't happy about it. I tried various genres in Japanese literature because I wanted to do everything equally. I joined poetry groups and writers' groups without caring about the order ranking inherent in Japanese literature. I just wanted to say "haiku is not in third place," but rather, "all genres are the same." However, I think *dentô* (traditional) haiku is still in third place.

RG: There is a kind of discrimination against senryu as well?

SR: Yes, once I read a haiku by Kitamura Kigin, for example (he was Bashô's teacher). Someone said "that is senryu!" "No," I said — that is haikai — which came before senryu. "Who wrote that haiku?" the person asked. "Kitamura Kigin was Bashô's master, so there was no senryu at that time," I said. Then he understood.

HF: Yes, it's true. *Haikai* originally meant "humor, humorous." *Haikai* is the root of haiku, but also the root of senryu.



RG: Related to the topic of *gendai* haiku, in English-language haiku, we have a young art form—the main tradition is only about sixty years old. Since being exported from Japan, there has been a strong focus on the classical masters while the contemporary tradition has remained largely unstudied. As a result, there is much respect and honoring of the classical writers and tradition. Although there has been this respect for traditional haiku, compositional approaches have been largely limited to varieties involving pictorial realism. Can you give some advice as to how one might liberate oneself or expand beyond the *shasei* (realistic sketch) — whether one is Japanese or actually, from any country?

HF: I don't know if I could give you advice, but, sentences will likely become shorter and shorter, especially in languages used for international communication (internet, email, etc.). I've been thinking that haiku will endure. Because, as technology has advanced, time has been disappearing — everything is becoming shorter and shorter — fragmented. You know, e-mail is very short, isn't it. Shorter sentences (phrases) will increasingly be used to create *uta* [song, poetry, or haiku]. You know, contemporary poetry (*shi*) has been falling in popularity recently. In the 1950s, shortly after the war, people grieved for their lives and for society and wrote long-form poetry. Well, it could be said this era was an epitome of modern poetry, in terms of composition and popularity. Since that time, phrases have become shorter and shorter, and particularly since the time of the university disputes, and social repulsion towards public order, *gendai* haiku began to increase in estimation. So, I think if you create haiku or make short poetic phrases, sentences with confidence, they will in the future become international, worldwide *uta*.

For instance in e-mail, or cell-phone mail, people are using very short sentences but sometimes also infusing a lot of meaning. Haiku will be similar — influenced by the short poem and such changes in communicative styles. I think that contemporary Japanese haiku

will continue to have even more commonality with the short-form poem, and haiku in the future may exist purely (defined) as a one-line poem, or a short-form poem. So I think Japanese haiku has commonality with short-form poem or one-line poem forms.

SR: Haiku will be developing purely as a one-line poem (*shi*)?

HF: I think so. As a short-form poem or one-line poem. But the question of how you can infuse the very short form with *kotodama* — is the key to how much and how multidimensionally you can express your feeling in haiku, or short-line, or the one-line poem. I have never tried, but for example, in e-mail people might just say "send me money!" And, a short sentence (short e-mail) is sometimes enough to express your feelings in a manner equivalent to a love letter.

RG: If someone wishes to expand their compositional ideas beyond pictorial realism in haiku — could you offer any advice?

HF: This is a very difficult question, so I'm not sure if I can answer properly or not. A short poem is limited as to words. So, you have to use your intelligence to infuse a lot of information, meaning, feeling. Well, adopting realism is okay, but it was a brief, temporary movement. Although not written, if you use the energy of *kotodama*, as I said before, if you use the "double sides" of words, the surface and deep world, as in *kotodama shinkô*, you can constellate a deep and multidimensional message, in a short form. The short poem will continue to exist in this century, with the power of *kotodama*.

RG: The powerful short poem. So, in a way, could we say, you don't think: "I'm a haiku poet," but rather, "I'm a poet, and I write in a short form," is this the way you think of yourself, as a poet?

HF: That's right. I don't like to use the term "*haijin*" as applied to myself. Simply "poet" is enough. If I must choose "haiku poet" or "writer of short poems," I want to say "I'm a poet" rather than "I'm a haiku poet." I am called *haijin*, not poet, because my poem style is haiku. Yet I remain hopeful that we can fairly say that the tanka writer, the senryu writer, the contemporary poet — is simply the same poet, short or long.

RG: Thank you for speaking at such length and so openly about your life and career.

HF: It's my hope that Japanese haiku may be read by many people outside Japan, and I'm very happy that some of my own haiku have been translated into English in *Kumaso-Ha*. I deeply appreciate it.

This interview was recorded January 20, 2004, Kumamoto, Japan, and conducted in

Japanese.



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