

Various Haikus

by Basho Matsuo

Basho Matsuo is known as the first great poet in the history of haikai (and haiku).

He too, wrote poems using jokes and plays upon words in his early stages, as they were in fashion, but began to attach importance to the role of thought in haikai (especially in hokku) from around 1680.

The thought of Tchouang-tseu, philosopher in the 4th century B.C., influenced greatly Basho, and he often quoted the texts of "The Book of master Tchouang" in his hokkus.

The thinker Tchouang-tseu denied the artificiality and the utilitarianism, seeing value of intellect low. He asserted that things seemingly useless had the real value, and that it was the right way of life not to go against the natural law.

To a leg of a heron
Adding a long shank
Of a pheasant.

This poem parodied the following text in "The Book of master Tchouang": "When you see a long object, you don't have to think that it is too long if being long is the property given by the nature. It is proved by the fact that a duckling, having short legs, will cry if you try to draw them out by force, and that a crane, having long legs, will protest you with tears if you try to cut them with a knife."

By playing on purpose in this haiku an act "jointing legs of birds by force" which Tchouang denied, he showed the absurdity of this act and emphasized the powerlessness of the human being's intelligence humorously.

Basho's haikus are dramatic, and they exaggerate humor or depression, ecstasy or confusion. These dramatic expressions have a paradoxical nature. The humor and the despair which he expressed are not implements to believe in the possibility of the human being and to glorify it. If anything, the literature of Basho has a character that the more he described men's deeds, the more human existence's smallness stood out in relief, and it makes us conscious of the greatness of nature's power.

The wind from Mt. Fuji
I put it on the fan.
Here, the souvenir from Edo. 1

Sleep on horseback,
The far moon in a continuing dream,
Steam of roasting tea.

Spring departs.
Birds cry
Fishes' eyes are filled with tears

Summer zashiki 2
Make move and enter
The mountain and the garden.

What luck!
The southern valley
Make snow fragrant.

A autumn wind
More white
Than the rocks in the rocky mountain.

From all directions
Winds bring petals of cherry
Into the grebe lake.

Even a wild boar
With all other things
Blew in this storm.

The crescent lights
The misty ground.
Buckwheat flowers.

Bush clover in blossom waves
Without spilling
A drop of dew.

Notes:

Originally, Basho didn't write the poem "To a leg of a heron..." as a hokku, but as one of verses in a haikai-renga.

This verse suggests the intention to laugh at himself: "What a stupid deed like drawing out a heron's leg it is to product one more series of haikai! Because it is produced so often."

¹ Edo: The old name of Tokyo.

² Zashiki: Japanese-style room covered with tatamis and open to the garden.
