

Proposal: Navigating 18th Century Haiku  
Translating the Poetry of Yosa Buson

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One of the difficulties in translating the poetry of Yosa Buson, an 18th century Japanese poet and painter, is the negotiation between the cultural differences between time and place, and still writing a translation that moves the audience within the limits of a haiku without doing any violence to the original text. My presentation would be on the difficulties in translating a literary master from the Edo Era, especially when the poems contain embedded cultural references that the average American reader would not be familiar with. An example of translating cultural differences can be seen in the following poem:

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し 焼 野  
き る と  
み 地 と  
哉 蔵 も  
の に

No totomo ni  
yakuru Jizou no  
shikimi kana

In a burnt field  
a child's blackened Jizou statue  
with grave branches

My translation of this haiku has navigated many cultural barriers, and while the reader may not completely understand all of the implications enough meaning remains for the poem to be moving within the target language. The above translation does take a few liberties with the text, yet still tries to adhere as closely as possible to the original. One, the opening line was not a burnt field, but a prepared field. However, up until the middle of the 1700s Japanese farmers would prepare or ready a field for plowing by setting it on fire to burn off the weeds. This practice was outlawed by the Tokugawa Shogonate as an early environmental protection act. Therefore the poem hints at an old, and then illegal act with the image of the burnt statue. Also I have added the word child in the second line to help explain the function of the statue. Jizou was, and is, a Bodhistava responsible for helping the spirits of dead children. The addition of the word child was necessary for understanding as a burnt Jizou statue would not convey the idea that a child has died. Also on one level the poem is a realistic description of a scene, yet there is also a deeper cultural aspect not fully conveyed — it was believed that when a child died it was because of the sins of a previous life drug the soul back into hell. Furthermore, one of the functions of Jizou was to lead the dead child's spirit out of hell and back into an other incarnation. The burned images then add an almost hopeless level of suffering.

In conclusion, the presentation will be on translating poems like the above and on how to make a moving poem without over using footnotes, nor colonizing the poem by complete disregard of the original culture.

#### Biographies:

Yosa Buson was one of the major three classic Japanese poets from the Edo period. He was born in 1716 and died on December 25, 1784. Besides being a poet he was also a painter. His paintings are undergoing somewhat of a revival in Japan and in the spring of 2009 there was an exhibition of his works at the Miho Museum in Shiga Prefecture. Finally, he lived the later part of his life in Kyoto and is buried at Konpukuji Temple.

As for me, I recently received my Ph.D. in Creative Writing from UW-Milwaukee, and I have published my own poetry, fiction and articles in seven countries and have won 5 poetry awards. My dissertation was a translation of Yosa Buson. I was also an ESL instructor and lived for some 11 years in Japan. Finally, I maintain my own promotional website (<http://www.epallan.com>).