Special feature – International Haiku Exchanges Today

Exchange with American Deaf Students – Reading Poems in Sign Language, by Kyoko Tsuruta

Poet, Kijo Murakami passed away in the year of Showa 13th; so this is the sixty seventh anniversaries of his death. Young college students from the United States who overcame the barriers of deafness performed Kijo’s life and poems in sign and body languages. I realized that Kijo’s spirit still exist today transcending space/time and difference in languages.

The delegation of five students from National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester, New York in the United States, along with four faculty members led by an associate professor, Jerome Cushman, and a female sign language interpreter, visited Murakami Kijo’s thatched hut and the Memorial Center in Takasaki, Gunma, on May 27, 2005.

The student delegation consisted of four male students: Stephen McDonald, Jack Williams, Christopher Zahniel, Sam Sepah, and the only female student: Jessica Thurber. National Technical Institute for the Deaf has been utilizing Haiku as a part of their educational curriculum, and the delegation learned about Kijo, who was a distinguished poet of excellent poems, even though he has lost his hearing when he was 18. The students were the 2005 winners of the Robert F. Panara Haiku/Tanka Contest, which was a part of the international exchange between NTID and Tsukuba College of Technology (formerly) in Ibaraki, three-year-college for deaf and hard of hearing students in Japan.

The students from Tsukuba College of Technology had already visited NTID in Rochester in March, and received special instruction in expressing their poems in sign and body languages. They were anticipating the week long visit by NTID students’ which occurred last May.

The visit to Kijo’s hermitage was one of their agenda for the trip in Japan. They entered from the very classic Japanese front door with their bodies bent, and bowed politely. Mikiya Murakami, a grandson of Kijo Murakami, welcomed them. He is also the director of the Kijo Memorial Center. He provided courteous guidance of the center, and I was in charge of Japanese-English interpreting at that time.

The students were fascinated with a large wall scroll of Kijo’s famous haiku, a photo with a master artist, Takemura Shuhou, inkstone, brush, reading table, hearing aid bag, and bell. They took a large number of photos, with permission.

Also, a folding screen, kakemono, and strip of fancy paper were displayed at the memorial center. The students gazed intently at Kijo and Shiki’s correspondences, and listened to a story in which Kijo commented on Sanpu Sugiya, another distinguished poet with hearing loss. They were also introduced to his famous poem which mentioned his deafness.
At last, it was time for the five students’ performance. They performed a kijo’s life story along with his seven poems in fluent sign and body languages for 20 minutes. They reproduced Kijo’s world dexterously with facial expressions. Their performance was interpreted into spoken English by Professor Cushman, then Professor Midori Matsufuji, an associate professor of Tsukuba College of Technology, interpreted into spoken Japanese.

The audience was fascinated by the students’ depth of knowledge of Kijo, interpretation of each of Kijo’s each haiku, and the hard work dedicated to the performance.

Professor Cushman made mention of several points as follows during his presentation entitled, “Practical Use of Haiku in Deaf Education.” “By converting a written poem or phrase into sign language or sign mime, it helps students to understand and analyze each poem.” Further, he mentioned that “the students felt a strong cultural tie with Kijo Murakami and Sanpu Sugiyama, when they were introduced to the fact that they were deaf” He concluded by saying, “poetry helps to simulate creativity and expression of students, and develops the imagination power, ability to think, and understanding of meaning.”

Finally, I would like to introduce Sam Sepah’s poem.

Sunrise from the bridge icicles drip into a thawing stream
日の出  橋のつららが  雪解け川にしたたる
アメリカの学生との交流

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鶴田 告子

米国ニューヨーク州ロチェスター市にある国立クリスチャン・ユニバーシティは、学部2年で英文学を専攻するサム・セガ君と、同じく2年で社会学科を専攻するノーマ・ノーマン君が、この春をもって、日本を訪問する予定です。

米国教育機関では、短期的な学生交流は、地域の文化・伝統を学ぶ機会であり、学生の相互理解を促進する重要な活動として扱われています。米国では、地域の文化を学ぶために、学生たちは単に英語の授業を受けるだけでなく、地域の文化に親しむ機会をもっているのです。

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