

"Poetry boxing," a poetry-reading contest that started in Japan 10 years ago, is spreading as a favorite pastime among people of all walks of life and all ages. In poetry boxing, two poets stand in a boxing ring and face off against each other with words instead of fists. They recite their own original poems, and judges decide the winner. In 1997, Japanese poetry reciter Kusunoki Katsunori established the Japan Reading Boxing Association (JRBA) and held the first poetry boxing tournament.

Poetry boxing was initially not properly understood by the public, with many wondering if it was a type of "performance cursing." But the game has lately been spreading nationwide and local preliminaries of the annual tournament are held in some 70% of the country's 47 prefectures, with as many as 15,000 persons participating.

According to Kusunoki, the winner is decided on the basis of the following three criteria: 1) the quality of voice, 2) the composition of poetry, and 3) performance of the poetry reciter. But these three points cannot be judged separately, being interrelated to one other. The combination of the three factors decides the impression of a

sages.

The seventh All-Japan Poetry Boxing Tournament, held in Tokyo in October 2007, attracted some 700 spectators, underlining the popularity of the game. Eighteen contestants, ranging in age from 15 to 71, who won local preliminaries entered the national tournament. A 21-year-old man from Kanagawa Prefecture, nicknamed Harei Suisei (which literally means Halley's comet in Japanese), who became this year's champion, beat rivals in four bouts by reciting a string of his original poems composed from the viewpoint of personified retort-packed food.

The world of virtual reality, such as the Internet, is based on unrealistic communications. As a result, JRBA leader Kusunoki notes, society today brims with egotistically spoken voices and words.

Poetry boxing is an analogue event in which competitors express themselves with their voices and bodies alone, while spectators emotionally feel what poetry boxers recite. Such a diversion goes against the trend of the digital society, which may be why it is being enthusiastically accepted by people with fresh wonder. **JS**

"Poetry Boxing"

By **OGATA Shinichi**

reciter as a whole.

For example, a weak voice by itself is not necessarily a disadvantage. If the reciter's voice matches the content of his/her poetry, his/her weak voice or poor performance hardly matters. After all, the deciding factor is how deeply the reciter's voice and words can reach listeners' hearts. Anybody who has something to convey to other people can participate in poetry boxing. That is why poetry boxing has spread among people regardless of their age or profession.

The oldest person ever to win the All-Japan Poetry Boxing Tournament is an 85-year-old man who won a local preliminary by reciting his own original poem said to be once highly valued by the renowned novelist Dazai Osamu (1909-1948). In the national tournament, he battled against a girl about 70 years his junior.

In 2004, a tournament for physically handicapped persons was held, which brought together some 50 poetry reciters. In the same year, linguistically handicapped people held a poetry boxing contest of their own to cultivate self-confidence in their stammering voices.

Schools in various parts of the country have begun to adopt poetry boxing in their curriculums. Ogori City, Fukuoka Prefecture, held poetry boxing tournaments for three consecutive years from 2003, participated in by all primary and junior high schools in the city. Miyazaki City hosts similar contests for students of primary and junior high schools. National competitions for high school students have already been held three times. Schoolteachers supervising poetry boxing say students are initially obsessed with contest results, but their concern gradually shifts to whether their messages are accurately received by their competitors and members of the audience or whether they correctly interpret their competitors' mes-

Photo: PANA



Naked down to his waist, "poetry boxer" Abe Toshikatsu, runner-up in a preliminary final in Yamagata Prefecture, performs during a "poetry boxing" match in the 2007 national competition in Tokyo, which was joined by 29 "reciting boxers" chosen in 13 local preliminaries.

Ogata Shinichi is Chief Editor, Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.