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Personal Predilection in Compiling and Translating an Anthology of Japanese Women Poets

Hiroaki Sato

An anthology necessarily follows "personal predilection," stressed William Rose Benét, having discharged his end of *Famous English and American Poetry*, whereas Conrad Aiken, having done his, chose to note, "American poetry has been extensively anthologized."(1) What Aiken said hardly applies to modern Japanese poetry,(2) but what Benét said does, and not just to the anthology I've recently published, *Japanese Women Poets* (M.E. Sharpe, 2007), of course, but also, with startling force, to the male-female proportions in some of the larger-scale anthologies. These are often oddly mislabeled *zenshu*, "complete works."

So, the 34-volume *Nihon shijin zenshu*, "complete Japanese poets," that Shinchosha published in the latter half of the 1960s includes, among the nearly 200 poets from the end of the 19th century onward, only seven women. The paucity of women in this large enterprise is remarkable, shocking even, because it covers all genres of poetry in a country where there are sharp genre demarcations in poetry—those who write tanka are called *kajin*, those who write haiku *haijin*, and those who write non-tanka, non-haiku poems *shijin*—and the "poets" in each genre tend to stay away from those in the other two. Only seven women wrote "poetry" in the seventy years since Shimazaki Toson (1872-1943) proclaimed, in his *Wakana-sho* (Collection of young herbs), in 1897, "At long last, the time for new poetry has come"?

The imbalance, in some ways, is even worse with the 99-volume *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikei*, "modern Japanese literature series," that Chikuma Shobo published, from 1968 to 1973. Of the thirteen volumes dedicated to *shiika*, "poetry," ten show the names of the poets in lieu of titles, and they together cover sixty-one poets, but just one woman among them: Yosano Akiko (1878-1942). Of the remaining three, vol. 93, devoted to *gendaishi*, "modern poetry," covers twenty-seven poets, but only one among them,Ishigaki Rin, is a woman; vol. 94, devoted to *tanka*, covers twen twenty-two, but there is no woman among them. Vol. 95, devoted to haiku, is a lot better, but even then only five among the thirty-six are women.

The question is: Did these large selections done around 1970 reflect the actual proportion of women who wrote poems during just about the 100 years after Japan started to seek from the West, in the late 19th century, "civilization and enlightenment"? Wasn't Japan supposed to be once notable for its "historical habit of recognizing women's poetry as the same as men's in rank," as the folklorist-poet Orikuchi Shinobu (also Shaku Choko; 1887-1953) observed,(3) something my anthology set out to show? Were the two selections, one focusing on poetry and the other on literature as a whole, overburdened with predilection? The answer came in two decades, at least in the genre of tanka, and it was a resounding yes.

In 1991 the tanka poet Takano Kimihiko (born 1941) published *Gendai no tanka* (Kodansha),(4) setting aside 38 slots for women out of the total of 105 for his anthology. This was nearly an about-face, for Takano covered the same period as the larger selections just cited, with the poets ranging from Sasaki Nobutsuna (1872-1963), scion of the classical tanka family who famously denounced Yosano Akiko's first collection of tanka, *Midaregami* (Hair in disorder), in 1901, as "pernicious to the human heart and poisonous to social education," to Tatsumi Yasuko (born 1966), whose references to the washing of her own genitals and such would certainly have driven Sasaki to a harsher condemnation – had he been alive. Even limiting ourselves to those born in the Meiji Era (1868-1912), nine out of the thirty-one poets are women.

In 1996, another tanka poet, one with a far greater command of the field, Okai Takashi (born 1928), published *Gendai Hyakunin Isshu* (Asahi Shimbunsha), with a similar male-female ratio, for the same period covered: 37 women out of 100. Okai's anthology inevitably reminds us that his ratio far exceeds that of its namesake anthology: *Hyakunin Isshu*, where just 21 out of 100 are women. Originally compiled by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241), the earlier anthology in the century format, with each poet represented by a single poem, became the bible for the Nijo School of tanka poets and, as it was turned into a game, went on to become the most famous anthology of all time in Japan. And it was mainly the women's position during the period Teika covered—from Emperor Tenji (626-671) to Retired Emperor Juntoku (1197-1242)—that led Orikuchi to make the observation quoted earlier. (5)

Hyakunin Isshu as Postal Stamps including Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shonagon, and Izumi Shikibu

Okai's anthology is notable in its eclecticism as well. There, Hayashi Amari (born 1963), who is represented by the following piece,

> The FUCK during menstruation is hot
>
> with wonder the two of us end up staring at a sea of blood

rubs shoulders with Her Majesty Michiko (born 1934), who is represented by an elegantly classical piece celebrating the coming-of-age of her first son, Naruhito, Prince Hiro. In case you wonder, Hayashi uses the word FUCK—yes, in English and in all caps—and she writes tanka in two lines, as opposed to the monolinear format most other tanka writers follow. I included Hayashi in my anthology because of her candid descriptions of sexual acts, besides the fact that she is a Catholic who teaches Sunday school. But I did not include Her Majesty, even though doing so would have been wonderful—not just because I included several empresses in the earlier periods, but also because, and this is more important perhaps, I remember the announcement of her engagement to the Crown Prince as one of the few happy moments in my high school days. Without Okai's prestige, though, I found daunting the laborious steps that I'd have to take to obtain permission from the Imperial Household Agency. I simply added her book of tanka in the bibliography.

Here, I might cite some comparative figures on the male-female ratio among poets, at least in the United States. Conrad Aiken's half of *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry*, compiled in the mid-1940s, begins with Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) and ends with José Garcia Villa (1908-1997). It covers a total of 90 poets, of whom 12 are women. Half a century later, John Hollander said, in a publicity session held when the two-volume *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (Library of America, 1994) that he edited came out (and when the volumes for the next 100 years were in preparation), that the male-female ratio around 1800 was 8 to 1; it became 4 to 1 around 1900, 2 to 1 around 1950, and 1 to 1 thereafter.

American Poets: Nineteeth Century

Would that make Aiken a man of too much "personal predilection"? Hard to say. When, uncertain of something that I had heard more than a dozen years ago, I got in touch with Hollander by email, he confirmed the figures, carefully noting that they are the proportions of poets included in the Library of America anthologies, and "give no clue to the power and poetic imagination of the poets in question." He added that "it was only in the middle and later 20th centuries that, in my view, the male/female ratio evened out, but also that more of the female poets—H.D., [Marianne] Moore, [Elizabeth] Bishop, [May] Swenson, [Mona Jane] Van Duyn—possessed true originality of the highest sort."(6)

With Hollander's comments, I checked Takano's anthology and, sure enough, the male-female ratio evens out as the time gets closer to ours. So, if you take the fifty years up to the time of the book's publication, the period that happens to begin with Takano himself, who was born in 1941, the ratio becomes 16 to 14.

But such numerical comparison may be silly—something Hollander's naming Bishop and Swenson in the same breath reminds me of. Bishop, who recoiled from the notion of treating women and men differently in literature, wrote to Swenson, on November 7, 1971:

> . . . I have always refused to be in any collections, or reviews, or special numbers of just women? *Always*—this has nothing to do with the present Women's Lib Movement (although I'm in favor of a lot of that, too, of course). I see no reason for them and I think it is one of the things to be avoided—and *with* "women's Lib" perhaps even more so. WHY "Women in Literature"? No—it's *The Women Poets in English,* I see. But still, WHY? Why not *Men Poets in English?* Don't you see how silly it is?(7)

Elizabeth Bishop

I naturally thought about this question as I set to work on my anthology, in the early 1990s, but ended up leaving it largely unresolved, although I wrote of Bishop's views in a column for a Japanese-language publication in New York and sent a copy to each of the living poets I thought including. In response, one poet, Komoda Ai, declined to be part of the project at the start. Another, Ito Hiromi, told me after the book came out, that she hadn't really been sanguine about her inclusion in it. I would only add that Bishop's view, as unanswerable as it is concerning the absurdity of the notion of an anthology of "men poets" even as it is admirable in its unalloyed human inclusiveness, would, if taken literally, negate most fields of study and investigation focused on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality.

The paucity of modern women poets, especially those in the non-tanka, non-haiku genre, in some of the major selections, at any rate, made my own selection process a little haphazard. After all, one half of my anthology is given to the modern period.(8) Also, there was the simple fact that inclusion of a poet in a major series didn't mean I liked the person—the matter of predilection, again. In this regard I note the famous Gendaishi bunko ("modern poetry library") series that Sichosha started in 1968, devoting each paperback volume to a single poet, and is still continuing, getting close to the 200th volume at the time of this writing.

Still, haphazardness led to some serendipities. At one point late in my compilation, for example, I needed to ask a poet—in this instance, Koike Masayo (born 1959)—to recommend some fellow poets whose work she regarded highly. One of the three poets she chose for me was Cheon Mihye (born 1955), who has written some of the most socio-politically convincing poems I've read for my anthology.

Cheon is a member of the ethnic group called *Zainichi*—for now: like "Negro," "black," "Afro-American," and "African-American" in the United States, the preference keeps changing. Her father is a Korean who went to Japan as a teenager, following Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, and settled down, whereas her mother was born there of Korean parents.(9) Cheon herself attended Korean schools in Tokyo and studied at Ehwa Women's University in Seoul for a while. What complicates the emotional status of someone of Korean descent is not just that Japan once turned its closest neighbor into a colony and abused it. Korea, following Japan's defeat, split into two different political entities, spawning two sets of political allegiances among the Japanese residents of Korean descent. Furthermore, Japanese attitudes toward the two Korea's have changed over time.

In reading Cheon's poem below, you also need to know a few linguistic differentiations. To start, there is no commonly accepted word in Korea or Japan that corresponds to the English word "Korea," which is derived from *Goryeo*, the name of the dynasty that lasted from 918 to 1392. The so-called North Korea is referred to as *Joseon* (in Japanese, *Chosen*) because of its official name, *Joseon Minjujueui Gonghwaguk*, and the so-called South Korea or simply Korea as *Hanguk* (*Kankoku*) because of its official name, *Taehanminguk*. As a result, in Japan those of Korean descent who maintain allegiance to the North are often referred to as *Jeseonin* (*Chosenjin*) and those who do so to the South are called *Hangukuin* (*Kankokujin*). The aforementioned term *Zainichi*, which simply means "being in Japan," was adopted partly to avoid political entanglement.

Cheon Mihye drawn by Kim Buk-sung

Still, I think the following, which is the opening part of a fairly long poem, will come across.

What Am I, "I" of When I Write a Poem?

I am a Zainichi. When I say that,

where is my feeling?

I am a Zainichi. When I say that,

why is it that my voice becomes so small?

I'm a Joseon person, didn't you know?

I am a Hanguk person, didn't you know?

Why is it that there's a difference in saying the two?

I am a Zainichi. When I said that,

people's reactions have been so multifarious it's funny.

One heard it with a pitying look.

One insistently told me, I don't mind it at all.

And yet she said, I'll absolutely keep that secret.

One apologized, I'm sorry.

And so on.

The other Zainichi poet whom Koike recommended, and I accepted, is Park Kyong-Mi (born 1956). In her youth, Park had recoiled from being associated with anything Korean, but later developed intense interest in old Korea and, for some years now, has been a passionate promoter of traditional Korean arts in Japan. Nevertheless, much of her poetry so far has little to do with things Korean. "Chima Chogori," a poem describing a person in that traditional Korean dress the poet saw in the middle of Tokyo is one of a few exceptions. I have included it in *Japanese Women Poets*.

Park Kyong-Mi

One poet, Nomura Hatsuko (born 1923), I chose, because I saw her tanka graphically describing the Battle of Okinawa cited in the poet Ooka Makoto's famous poetry column in the daily Asahi Shimbun, *Oriori no uta*, "Poems for occasions." That was in the fall of 1999. I wrote Ooka, who kindly sent me a copy of the page of the anthology where Nomura's tanka appeared. Then I got in touch with the poet. Considering the great many tanka poets available in small-scale, specialized collections, some might think such steps would be gratuitous. But I wanted someone who described a battle during the Pacific War in realistic terms, just as I sought, and found, a woman who described a battle during Japan's Age of Warring States. Here are a few of Nomura's tanka:

Deranged a soldier steals, devours the riceball given to a soldier who's lost both his arms and legs

Every time the soldier whose jaw is shot through tries to speak maggots splutter out of it

Maggots thriving lice wiggling in the cave the stench of blood – feces –

urine – pus suffocates

Another poet, Nagashima Minako (born 1943), came to my attention because Koyanagi Reiko (born 1935), a poet I've known for many years as owner of a gallery and publisher of books,(10) sent me a bunch of books, Nagashima's among them. Like several other poets in my anthology, Nagashima came to poetry-writing late in life—through an adult education course. Someone who has taught at schools for the retarded and handicapped since graduating from the Japan College of Social Work, she accepts realities as they are and has the ability to depict them as such, often with a touch of humor.(11) Here is a poem about something she often experiences as a social worker.

The Girl Who Turned into Tea

I looked into her face and she was like a wax doll.

Mouth slightly open,

she was lightly made up.

Her parents, sitting side by side, kept their eyes down.

Incense-burning done,

they nevertheless came firmly to thank me.

The sutra-recitation went on.

Only adults went before her to burn incense, one after another.

If you work for a school for the handicapped,

a mourning dress is a must, they said.

But death is part of dailiness,

so should manners be at the farewell.

Nevertheless she came back to me

several days later, as tea.

Some came back as towels.

When such things pile up in my house

I give them to a bazaar.

Each finds its home,

tea or towel.

When my turn comes, I'll use ice cream,

so it may melt away,

not to be used again.

In Japan, as in some other countries no doubt, funeral participants receive a gift from the chief mourner as a token of thanks.

Japanese Women Poets meandered, from start to finish, over the course of more than a dozen years. Many details have already vanished into my murky memory. Having mentioned Her Majesty Michiko, though, I remember one other poet I regret I couldn't

include: the singer/songwriter Nakajima Miyuki (born 1952). I hoped to cover as many poetic genres as possible, and Nakajima was the best candidate as a lyricist. I wrote her care of her publisher. There was no response, and I did not press the matter further. She was by then too famous.

Notes

(1) *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry* (The Modern Library, 1944, 1945), p. 5 and p. 313.

(2) In the past half-century there have been at least two attempts to encompass, in a single volume, Japanese poetry in all ages and in all forms except *kanshi*, poems written in classical Chinese, according to Maruya Saiichi in his idiosyncratic account of Japanese literature, *Nihon bungaku hayawakari* (Kodansha, 1984). These are *Nihon shikasho*, ed. Saigo Nobutsuna, Ando Tsuguo, and Hirosue Tamotsu (Miraisha, 1958), and *Nihon shiikasho*, ed. Yamamoto Kenkichi (Heibonsha, 1959).

(3) Orikuchi Shinobu, *Josei tanka-shi* (History of Tanka by Women), *Zenshu*, vol. 11 (Chuo Koron Sha, 1956; 4th rev. ed., 1984), p. 48.

(4) In his preface to *Gendai no tanka*, Tsukamoto Kunio mentions an anthology of poems in all forms but limited to the Showa era, *Showa shiikasho*, ed. Kubota Utsuho (Shogakukan, 1990).

(5) It would not be fair for me not to add that Orikuchi, like Arthur Waley, despaired of the rhetorical complexities embodied in much of Teika's anthology

(6) Hollander's email to Sato, 19 July 2008. The Library of America has so far published two of the planned four volumes of *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*.

(7) Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, selected and edited by Robert Giroux (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), pp. 548-549. The title of this collection of Bishop's letters comes from that of one of her poems.

(8) In my forthcoming article in *Gengo bunka*, the periodical of the language institute of the Meiji Gakuin University, I discuss the difficulties involved in making selections for the earlier period, the question of translation, and other matters.

(9) The citizenship status of Koreans in Japan between 1910 and 1945 somewhat resembles that of Puerto Ricans in the United States since the Jones-Stafroth Act, of 1917.

(10) Hiroaki Sato, tr., *Reiko Koyanagi: Rabbit of the Nether World* (Red Moon Press, 1999). Koyanagi is one of several woman poets for whom I managed to work out individual volumes before and after I began work on *Japanese Women Poets*.

(11) Hiroaki Sato, tr., *The Girl Who Turned into Tea: Poems of Nagashima Minako* (P.A., A Press, 2000).

Hiroaki Sato is a translator and essayist in New York. His most recent book is Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology.

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