

Ryokan's Tanka World

Sanford Goldstein

A famous anecdote about Ryokan offers some insight into the creation of tanka. Ryokan's family, the Yamamoto, was a prominent one in the coastal town of Izumozaki, which is now part of Niigata Prefecture. Ryokan's brother Yoshiyuki had a son called Umanosuke, who was to eventually become the head of the Yamamoto clan, in decline at that time for several years. Ryokan's nephew had begun to indulge in a life of irresponsible pleasures and would not take anyone's advice. So Umanosuke's mother Yasuko asked Ryokan to show her son the errors in his behavior. Ryokan proceeded to the family home and stayed there on a three-day visit, all the while remaining silent, apparently unable to offer any moral advice to the young man. When it came time for Ryokan to leave, the mother thought that Ryokan would finally speak up when he asked the son to help him tie his sandals, and she hid behind a screen to listen to Ryokan's parting words of wisdom to her son. Suddenly, as the son was tying Ryokan's sandals, he felt something cold on his neck, and glancing up, he found tears falling from Ryokan's eyes. Like the incongruity of a satori moment, Umanosuke recovered his lost sense of responsibility. Ryokan stood up and silently left.

It seems to me that this episode contains the essence of a tanka moment. Ryokan, as far as I know, never wrote a tanka on this event, but since I feel compelled to write my own tanka on it, it might be something like the following:

no words
of admonishment for the boy,
no moral clichés,
Ryokan's tears
say it all

It was Ishikawa Takuboku who, in a long essay serialized in the Tokyo

Mainichi newspaper from November 30 to December 7, 1909, defined what I believe was true for Ryokan and for most modern tanka poets. Wrote Takuboku: "Poetry must not be what is usually called poetry. It must be an exact report, an honest diary, of the changes in a man's emotional life." ¹ I believe that Ryokan's tanka are reports of his everyday life in joy or sadness, in sickness or health, in isolation or in harmony. Tanka as diary I have found is also true for the tanka poets I have studied, Yosano Akiko, Ishikawa Takuboku, Saito Mokichi, Masaoka Shiki, and Aizu Yaichi. Having attended the 58th memorial service for Aizu Yaichi's adopted daughter Takahashi Kiiko in July in 2002, I am moved again and again by Aizu Yaichi's beautiful tanka sequence *Yamabato*, which is a kind of diary of Aizu's escape from Tokyo during the bombings in the last war and of the final days of his adopted daughter at the Kannondo Temple in Nishijo village, now part of *Nakajo-machi* in Niigata Prefecture.

The first six of the one hundred Ryokan tanka that Professor Fujisato Kitajima and I translated for our book on Ryokan's tanka and haiku are tanka relating to the village children. It is not difficult to see what the diary entry for that day would be:

with the children
 in this village
 I bounce my *temari* ball—
 may the evening shadows
 fail to fall this spring day! ²

from morning to evening
 this long hazy spring day
 has passed
 bouncing the *temari* ball
 with the village children ³

bounce the *temari* ball—
 one two three four five six seven
 eight nine ten
 and ten once reached

it starts all over again! ⁴

at long last
 the spring day has arrived
 when under the trees
 of this shrine
 I can play with the village children ⁵

beneath the trees
 in the grove of this shrine
 I play with the village kids –
 may it not grow dark
 this spring day! ⁶

children
 let's go out
 to the hills of Mt. Yahiko
 to see the bright-colored violets
 in full bloom! ⁷

Nor is it difficult to understand why Ryokan delighted in playing with the village children – after the long winter in Snow Country during severe months of restricted activity, what a delight it must have been for Ryokan, the freedom of the outdoors and all its beauty, especially the appeal of the games of children. Kera Yoshishige, whose father Kera Shukumon was Ryokan's friend and patron, had the good fortune to be one of the village children Ryokan played with. In *Ryokan zenji kiwa* (*Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryokan*), which Kera Yoshishige wrote around 1845 or 1846, there are numerous anecdotes about Ryokan's daily life.

Kera notes in his *Curious Accounts* how Ryokan always joined with the village children in their various games. One of these games was a game in which the children made him bend over backward, counting each time he bent a unit of money so that Ryokan had to bend back more and more until he practically lost his balance, thus making the children laugh hysterically. This falling backward was based on a story of Ryokan's watching an auction

going on. The auctioneer shouted out a price in such a loud voice that Ryokan recoiled, bending all the way backward, so that the local children made it into a game. Another game was with the *temari* ball bounced to various songs, a competitive bouncing by the numbers to see how long a child could do it. I am indebted to Ryuichi Abé's and Peter Haskel's remarkable book *Great Fool* for information about this game as well as other aspects of Ryokan.⁸ The *temari* ball is made of cloth bound together with bright colored threads. This traditional ball is apparently difficult to bounce, the game demanding concentration as well as technique. The child must not only bounce the ball at a speed that is steady but must also keep up the counting. On one occasion, Teishin, the nun who was to have such a prominent role in Ryokan's last years, made him a *temari* ball. Wrote Teishin in her tanka to Ryokan: "playing on Buddha's road,/you never tire/of bouncing your *temari* ball/just like this,/you inexhaustible Dharma."⁹

There is, of course, the famous anecdote known by Japan's schoolchildren on the episode of Ryokan's playing hide-and-go-seek with the village children and finding a place of refuge in a haystack. Unable to find him and with the sun setting and dinner time approaching, the children went off to their homes. Ryokan waited continually, all night in fact, and the next morning when the farmer's daughter came to fetch some hay with which to light the morning fire in the kitchen hearth, she was startled to discover Ryokan hiding in the hay. Ryokan pleaded with her not to shout so that the children would not know his hiding place.

To be sure these are amusing tales and part of Ryokan's life. Nevertheless, I find it annoying to see the repeated advertisements for *kamaboko* picturing Ryokan with the jolly face of an old-timer enjoying the butterflies as if he didn't have a care in the world or a thought in his mind.

For Ryokan was a complicated person, a multi-dimensional person, a rebel without a cause, a man who understood his own assumed roles, a perfect psychologist who could give wholeheartedly of his time with the children and others while remaining silent when the occasion demanded. We have to keep in mind that Ryokan remained an outsider, not belonging to any religious sect even though he was trained as a Soto Zen priest. He received from his Zen master the *inka no ge*, the certificate testifying to his enlightenment. As a Zen Buddhist, Ryokan was not bound by time, by

schedules, by the rat race most of us moderns find ourselves unhappily steeped in. In writing his tanka, he did not have to follow any of the rules, especially in his *kanshi*, his Chinese poems, but certainly for a Japanese the 5-7-5-7-7 pattern of the tanka came to him as naturally as breath itself. For those *gaijin* tanka poets who are busily counting syllables to make a tanka, Takuboku's anecdote about a schoolmaster who sent him a poem a day with perfect count but without any content, without any serious realization of his own limits as a human being, is relevant—Takuboku found that teacher pathetic, knowing that syllable count alone will not make one a tanka poet. With Ryokan, he is always aware of himself as a human being, a humane being, someone with that confident awareness of the limits of the world yet aware too of the wonders of the world, as, for example, in nature.

I imagine that what Ryokan did in his two huts on Mt. Kugami (each lived in at a different period in his life) was to face an isolated life with courage and humility and all the divergent emotions that a human being is heir to. He enjoyed calligraphy, he was interested in phonetics, and he studied the *Manyōshū* poets, so why not continue to write a tanka diary of his days and nights? And that diary includes many more strenuous moments than the joyous ones with the village children. A life of isolation has problems of its own and difficult choices too. It seems to me that Ryokan chose to be a loner most of his life. He abandoned his family responsibilities, and he left his village Zen temple to follow another master to Okayama. He also wandered for years after abandoning his Zen temple once his Zen master had died. His mother passed away after he had long left his home in Izumozaki, and his father committed suicide. And so a major pattern in Ryokan's life seems to be the presence of real isolation even as he has his moments of sociability.

The following tanka seems to illustrate his loner-dom:

it's not that
I am out of touch
with the world—
I am better off
playing by myself ¹⁰

In our note to this poem, Professor Kitajima and I point to the self-portrait

Ryokan drew beside the tanka. The preface to the poem is "Jiga jisan," which translates as "Written for his own self-portrait." Ryokan is seen enjoying himself while he reads by lantern light. Even indoors he is wearing his priest's hood. Since a Zen priest shaves his head, the hood keeps him warm. So one imagines Ryokan on a winter night alone in his hut reading, studying, writing Japanese and Chinese poems, and doing calligraphy.

Another reason why he enjoyed being alone was due to his love of nature. Many of the tanka are nature poems. One tanka has him enjoying the cherry blossoms, another the sound of wagtails, still another pleasure in the movement of birds, and others on plum blossoms in moonlight or tree peonies or the voices of insects. These tanka are Japanese at their core and do not, I believe, set Ryokan apart from the usual Japanese person.

One of the poems that has a special meaning for me now that I am moving into a small village on the outskirts of Shibata has to do with the sound of frogs:

from the mountain paddies
near this gate
the sounds of frogs,
their voices precious to me
in the evening ¹¹

so enjoyable
in my thatched hut
to stretch out my legs
and listen to the frogs
in the paddy fields among the hills ¹²

But other tanka poems relate to the trials of life on Mt. Kugami, one of these being the difficulty of keeping warm during the harsh winters of Snow Country:

I lie here
all but putting my legs
on the buried embers,

the cold this time
penetrating my belly ¹³

inside my humble hut
in the shadow of a mountain,
so fierce is the chill
I remain awake all night
piling brushwood on my fire ¹⁴

In addition, there were also the negative aspects of loneliness, the desire for human contact, for adult companionship which rarely occurred, especially in the winter:

when you are busy,
you send me word
you cannot come;
when you are not busy,
not a word reaches me ¹⁵

while I am spending
the entire night
in my humble hut,
hail is bouncing
through the cedar leaves ¹⁶

Many tanka reveal Ryokan's feelings of defeat, of the despair old age, of a life that tires:

about the pathos
of an old man,
whom can I tell?
having forgotten my staff,
I trudge home at dusk ¹⁷

The staff was quite necessary for Ryokan in walking along mountain trails

or anywhere else.

Sometimes he questions his choosing to become a monk:

why did I
 leave home to be a monk?
 I think it over
 until my heart is dyed
 deep as the black sleeves of my robe ¹⁸

No doubt Ryokan felt a certain degree of guilt in having abandoned his duty as the eldest son and leaving his brother Yoshiyuki to be the head master of the village. His father too had abandoned the family and had committed suicide. Thoughts about his mother's struggles must have brought pain. There must have been many moments of vacillation in Ryokan's decision to become a priest and the hardships the choice of being a monk entailed.

And of course there was illness:

easy it is
 to express "diarrhea"
 in words,
 but in truth
 it is really hard to bear ¹⁹

In Professor Kiichi Kato's fine book entitled *Ryokan's Calligraphy*, which Professor Kitajima and I translated into English, Professor Kato offers part of a letter as an example of Ryokan's intense pain in illness. Our translation: "I wish this long night would end and it would be day. Once the night's over, the woman who helps me will come and take care of me and wash the lower part of my body. Until she comes, I keep tossing about in bed because of the pain in my stomach. I am just not able to get through this long night." ²⁰

Before I turn to those tanka poems which convey Ryokan's thoughts about the world and about Zen Buddhism, for a diary not only gives the emotional elements of one's life, but also one's perceptions and thoughts and analyses on the human condition, I would like to go out on a limb that others may

severely criticize me for. Their criticism of me would not be for believing that Ryokan's Chinese poems, his *kanshi*, are his best poems but for the idea I have that these *kanshi* are an extension of his tanka. That is to say, the longer *kanshi* are like a *rensaku*, a tanka sequence. Even a *kanshi*, for example, of twenty lines might be recast as a sequence of four or five tanka, for it seems to me the *kanshi* are like diary insertions. Professor Kitajima and I translated 26 of Ryokan's Chinese poems and printed them in the *Bulletin of Keiwa College* in February 1998.

One of my favorites in this series is #17:

In these tattered clothes, these rags,
 These rags and tatters--this is my life.
 As for my food, I beg a pittance by the side of a road.
 As for my house, it's overrun with mugwort.
 Gazing at the autumn moon, I mumble poems all night.
 Enchanted by spring flowers, I lose my way and forget to
 come home.
 Ever since I left the temple that sustained me,
 This is the kind of battered great fool I've become. ²¹

In this *kanshi*, which can be thought of as a kind of tanka sequence, Ryokan summarizes his life as a Zen priest. His clothes are simple and frayed. He begs for food, the duty of a Zen priest in the spirit of Shakyamuni. His house is not really taken care of, the garden overrun with mugwort or wild grass. Yet he does not complain under the autumn moon, which in Zen is a symbol of enlightenment. During the spring season he often loses his way back home, for he is free, not bound by schedules or time as he observes the spring flowers. Ever since he left the Zen temple in Okayama Prefecture where he trained as a Zen acolyte and attained enlightenment, this has been Ryokan's life, a life that others might consider the life of a fool, but it is a life Ryokan fully embraces.

Another favorite *kanshi* is #20, which is short and certainly contains the essence of a tanka moment:

I look back over my more than seventy years,

And I am tired of ascertaining what's right and wrong
for human beings.

Tonight's deep snow has left the paths deserted,
And I watch an incense stick burning down. ²²

He had lived on Mt. Kugami for twenty-six years, but with advancing age it was difficult to remain on the mountain, and he moved to Shimazaki, a village seven miles south of Mt. Kugami where he remained in a detached house of his friend and patron Kimura Motouemon. Ryokan was somewhat depressed, missing his earlier life on Mt. Kugami, yet as a Zen Buddhist the usual dichotomies of right and wrong are discounted. What is true, real, is the snow along a deserted path. The incense stick burning down is of course an ephemeral moment of quiet, yet at the same time Ryokan realizes that his life is slowly winding down, the way an incense stick irrevocably must burn itself out.

Another *kanshi*, one translated by Abé and Haskel in their book on Ryokan, also has the flavor of diary with the emphasis, however, on thought or perception:

I want to ask you: in this whole world
What is the most profound
most wonderful thing?
Sit erect and meditate right to the end
As you meditate, you'll find a clue
And everything will naturally become clear
Keep your concentration
don't miss your chance
After a while, your mind will be pure
your wisdom ripe
Then you won't have to fool yourself any more ²³

It seems to me that Ryokan is offering a koan, a question one must focus on to break through the barrier of logic which bars the mind from true liberation. That koan, then, is "What is the most profound, the most wonderful thing?" In order to find the "answer" to the koan, Ryokan says

one must sit in zazen, one must truly concentrate. Obviously breaking through the logic of a koan takes time, sometimes years, but in this *kanshi*, Ryokan telescopes the time. His "After a while" is deliberately vague since, as I have indicated, the process can take years and years. When one breaks through, all becomes clear, the mind is purified, the wisdom immediate. That is, once the person in zazen breaks through the dichotomy of logic-illogic, the seeker will not have to fool himself any longer with ridiculous questions about "the most profound" or "the most wonderful." One goes out into the world and finds life, the life out there, the moment itself, the thing in itself, the moment fully lived.

Through his *kanshi*, Ryokan merged elements of Buddhism with the concretes of his everyday life. One of the most moving *kanshi* for me is the following one translated by Abe and Haskel:

I remember how it was when I was young
 The terrible hardship just staying alive
 In search of clothing and food
 I tramped hopelessly from shabby town to town
 Till on the road I found a man of wisdom
 Who explained things to me through and through
 Then I saw that all along
 the precious jewel was in my robe
 That jewel is with me here, right now
 Having found it I've gone into business for myself
 Traveling all over with my wares exactly as I please ²⁴

The allusion to the "precious jewel" is one of the parables in the *Lotus Sutra*. The story involved a young man who decided to make his living in a distant country. He visited a friend's home before departing, and they drank their farewells. The young man became inebriated and fell asleep. Worried about his friend's venture, the other sewed a precious jewel inside the young man's robes. Later the traveler went through difficulties on his journey and became poverty-stricken, each day spent in search of food and clothing. Eventually the friend came to see him and told the young man of the treasure he always carried in his robe. Obviously the revelation saved him. Thus it is

that Buddha's disciples teach the *Lotus Sutra* to emphasize forever that the treasure that makes it possible for all beings to attain enlightenment was always inside them but had failed to be realized. Ryokan's *kanshi* tells of his days of pilgrimage. He endured hardships in the Zen temple in Okayama. There he had read Dogen's *Eiheiroku* that made him realize that monastery life was a waste of time. There was no need to search for enlightenment. It was already in each person's mind. Possibly Ryokan's return to his roots represents the same kind of "hidden jewel." Enlightenment could be found even in his own hometown.

Let us now look at some of the tanka which reveal Ryokan as a Zen Buddhist steeped in his awareness that the complexity of the world can be reduced to the thing-in-itself, to those moments of full immersion in life, where the dualities do not hinder us in truly living freely and simply.

One of Ryokan's most moving tanka relates to the compassion of the Bodhisattva, who delays his own nirvana in order to help others find the way. In tanka #74 Ryokan writes:

if the sleeves
of my black robe
were more ample,
I would shelter under them
the poor of this world ²⁵

It is the duty of a Bodhisattva to delay his own nirvana to help others find salvation. Ryokan's compassion for those suffering in the world is so great that he laments his own limited powers. In this tanka the idea of Buddhist compassion, the *dojo* of the Kannon, is uppermost:

In tanka #77:

should people ask
how I lead a hermit's life,
I would answer:
I don't mind if it rains
I don't mind if the wind blows ²⁶

In Buddhistic terms, one renounces the body—that is, one accepts all the conditions of the world as natural. Pain, suffering, isolation, hardship, these are the natural conditions, the *samsara* of the floating world. To get beyond *samsara* is to walk, to gain access to the path toward enlightenment.

In tanka #100, the tanka Kawabata Yasunari quoted in his 1968 Nobel Prize speech, his version as translated by Edward Seidensticker is:

I would like to leave
something as a memory:
flowers in spring,
cuckoos in summer,
tinted leaves in fall ²⁷

It would be un-Ryokan-like to suggest his own calligraphy and his poems were his legacy. No, he turned to the world of nature, the world as it is. Kawabata in his speech felt that Ryokan suggested the old world of Japanese culture as well as his own religious feelings.

Commentaries on tanka poems and the poet's biography may be endless, so this seems like a good place to stop, but one final consideration about the human Ryokan is his relationship with the Buddhist Nun Teishin. As lovers in Heian did, Ryokan and Teishin exchanged poems, Teishin living in the Emma Shrine in Fukushima in Nagaoka. Teishin had written Ryokan the following poem: "too busy/confined to my hut/where thick creepers climb,/ and so my body cannot move/the way my heart desires to." Answered Ryokan in a very clever way:

there are people
who sacrifice themselves
to save the world:
alas, I pursue leisure
loafing in my humble hut ²⁸

It is typical of Ryokan to negate himself, to criticize himself, yet he is political in urging Teishin to follow the laws of Buddhism to save others. She ought not to be devoting herself to home duties. She ought to be out

Bodhisattva-ing. But of course Ryokan hopes that her travels may help her find her way to Echigo and his hut.

A good Buddhist does not value gold or silver, but here is Ryokan praising Teishin:

more than
all the jewels and gold
under heaven,
your letter of early spring
is a delight to me ²⁹

And finally:

each day and hour
I have looked forward
to seeing you,
and now that I see you again,
what else is there to yearn for? ³⁰

In his old age Ryokan was lonely, isolated, and ill. Fortunately he found a soul-mate in Teishin. Even as he was suffering from the diarrhea which had turned into colon cancer, he found pleasure in the companionship and penpal-ship of this young nun. They exchanged tanka, they looked forward to meeting one another, and they had a special something together. It was Teishin who visited Ryokan when he was dying, and perhaps it was Teishin who held Ryokan upright through his final prayers. In those days Zen priests did not die while lying in bed, so perhaps Teishin helped Ryokan sit in the zazen meditative position as he passed away.

But Ryokan did not pass away. He still lives among us, still teaches us, still moves us by laughter or tears or decency or common sense or life's and his own contradictions. Ryokan he is and Ryokan he remains, beloved by Japanese and foreigners alike.

Notes

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Seminars, Niigata School, under the auspices of Keiwa College, Open College, as the third paper in the series entitled "Ryokan in a Global Era."

- 1 See Takuboku Ishikawa, *Romaji Diary and Sad Toys*, translated by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda (Tokyo and Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1985), p. 40.
- 2 Sanford Goldstein, Shigeo Mizuguchi, and Fujisato Kitajima, *Ryokan: Selected Tanka Haiku* (Niigata: Kokudo, 2000), p. 17.
- 3 *Ryokan*, p. 18
- 4 *Ryokan*, p. 19.
- 5 *Ryokan*, p. 20.
- 6 *Ryokan*, p. 21.
- 7 *Ryokan*, p. 22.
- 8 See Ryuichi Abé and Peter Haskel, *Great Fool* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), pp. 94-106.
- 9 *Ryokan*, p. 139, note 3.
- 10 *Ryokan*, p. 26.
- 11 *Ryokan*, p. 28.
- 12 *Ryokan*, p. 27.
- 13 *Ryokan*, p. 68.
- 14 *Ryokan*, p. 65.
- 15 *Ryokan*, p. 70.
- 16 *Ryokan*, p. 77.
- 17 *Ryokan*, p. 96.
- 18 *Ryokan*, p. 109.
- 19 *Ryokan*, p. 102.
- 20 Kiichi Kato, *Ryokan's Calligraphy*, translated by Sanford Goldstein and Fujisato Kitajima (Niigata: Kokodo, 1997), p. 119.
- 21 Fujisato Kitajima and Sanford Goldstein, "Selections from Ryokan's Chinese Poems," *Bulletin of Keiwa College*, No. 7, February 1998, p. 267.
- 22 *Bulletin*, p. 270.
- 23 Abé and Haskel, p. 153.
- 24 Abé and Haskel, p. 64.
- 25 *Ryokan*, p. 90.
- 26 *Ryokan*, p. 93.
- 27 See *Ryokan*, p. 3. See also p. 116.
- 28 See *Ryokan*, p. 110. See notes on tanka #94, p. 178.
- 29 *Ryokan*, p. 114.
- 30 *Ryokan*, p. 115.

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