

Lawrence E. Marceau.
Takebe Ayatari: A Bunjin Bohemian in Early Modern Japan

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In *Takebe Ayatari: A Bunjin Bohemian in Early Modern Japan*, Lawrence Marceau explores the career of the poet, painter, and fiction writer Takebe Ayatari (1719-74) in the context of eighteenth-century Japanese *bunjin* culture. Marceau notes a number of possible translations for “*bunjin*” (the Japanese reading of the Chinese “*wenren*”), including “‘people of letters,’ ‘cultured persons,’ ‘literati,’ ‘litterateurs,’ ‘bohemians,’ and ‘idealists’” (p. 2, n. 5). The book’s title implies “bohemian” as a favored translation, but this notion of the *bunjin* as bohemian is not explicitly pursued in the book. Marceau ultimately leaves “*bunjin*” untranslated, a good choice in that the term as he uses it cannot be reduced to any one of the various possible translations he mentions.

In the introduction, Marceau characterizes eighteenth-century *bunjin* as “well-educated, talented, and socially aware individuals” who pursued cultural activities while “interact[ing] in new and loosely organized artistic communities,” and as “nonconformists [who] aspired to lead productive lives with a minimum of self-compromise, often in an ideological climate all too directed toward keeping people in their respective places” (p. 10). He discusses a number of modern scholars’ interpretations of the *bunjin*, the most useful of which is Nakamura Yukihiro’s list of four characteristics of early modern *bunjin*: versatility, antagonism to *zoku* (the common, or vulgar), eremitism, and aloof idealism (pp. 5-6). As factors contributing to the development of a *bunjin* consciousness in eighteenth-century Japan,

Marceau cites the combination of continental models, the lack of opportunities for the educated to pursue official service, and the separation of private and public spheres advocated in the philosophy of Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), which encouraged a more generous view of private eccentricities. It is difficult to precisely define who is or is not a *bunjin*, and in the introduction Marceau at times strives for a more clear-cut delineation of the *bunjin* than is really possible. Also, as Marceau notes, the people that we classify as *bunjin* today did not necessarily use this label for themselves. Nevertheless, the notion of the *bunjin* provides a useful context for understanding Ayatari’s career, especially because of how Marceau emphasizes the historical specificity of eighteenth-century *bunjin* culture, calling attention to its discontinuities with earlier phenomena such as medieval eremitism.

The chapters are organized according to the different names Ayatari went by throughout his life (for the sake of readability I will simply refer to him as Ayatari, although this was actually one of his later sobriquets). Marceau provides detailed explanations of Ayatari’s sobriquets, explaining how they incorporate not only classical references and images of elegant detachment, but also markers of school allegiances. In this way, he highlights how *bunjin* culture provided a space for the exploration of new identities, while at the same time being governed by its own political struggles.

The clash with public norms that was to propel Ayatari into a literary career is described in chapter 1, “Leaving Home: Kitamura Kingo Hisamura, Warrior of Tsugaru, 1719-38.” Ayatari was born into a high-ranking samurai family of Hirosaki domain in Mutsu, which Marceau describes as “a line of stoic, even Spartan, military stalwarts” (p. 27), a background in stark contrast to his later image as a free-spirited aesthete. His abandonment of

the world he grew up in was occasioned by a scandal in his late teens that appears to have involved an affair with his elder brother's wife, and that exemplifies the kind of conflict between private emotions and public morality that is so often depicted in Tokugawa literature. Our knowledge of this comes from a single document that may or may not be genuine, but Marceau notes that whatever the exact facts of the case may have been, the picture we get in the document of Ayatari as a "sensitive, emotional, and profoundly intense figure" (p. 36) is consistent with what we see in his later artistic and literary career.

As a result of this scandal Ayatari was compelled to leave home and strike out on his own, and chapter 2, "Entangled Rat' Kasso, Zen Pilgrim of Dewa Province: 1738-45," covers his early years in exile. After leaving Hirosaki he made his way to Kyoto, where he became involved in haikai, receiving instruction from Shida Yaba (1662-1740), one of the few surviving direct disciples of Bashō. He soon had to travel back to Tōhoku, apparently because of a death in his family, and this served as the occasion for him to become acquainted with Buddhist clergymen, leading to his taking Zen vows in 1740 (he eventually returned to lay life in 1749). This did not signify an abandonment of his literary interests, as he only took this step when he became convinced that Zen was compatible with his pursuit of haikai, and he also connected literature and Buddhism more directly by writing collections of temple origin stories. He eventually made it back to the Kansai area, where Yaba's students offered to set him up in Yaba's former hermitage and make him leader of their haikai circle. Throughout this account of Ayatari's early career, Marceau calls attention to his opportunism and political savvy, noting, for example, how he took Buddhist vows in large part to further his own career goals, and showing how his charisma and skill at making connections

led to his being appointed Yaba's successor at such a young age.

Despite the promise of a secure position, Ayatari was soon seeking out better opportunities, as recounted at the beginning of chapter 3, "Tōin of the Capital: 1745-47." He had recently made the acquaintance of the poet and painter Sakaki Hyakusen (1697-1752), who urged him to abandon Yaba's old poetic circle, and instead take up with the rival Ise School of haikai. In an act of betrayal plotted by Hyakusen, Ayatari left the Kansai area for Kanazawa under the pretense of going on a pilgrimage, when his true purpose was to study haikai under Wada Kiin (1700-50), the leader of the Ise School in Kanazawa. Under Kiin he took on the sobriquet Tōin, a combination of the character for "the capital," indicating where he was coming from, and the second character of Kiin's name. Marceau explains that he was the only student of Kiin's to be granted the use of this character, indicating a high status within his circle. Eventually he had a falling out with Kiin, and on top of this the members of Yaba's old circle became aware of his defection, leaving Ayatari in a difficult position. He was able to continue to receive teachings from the Ise School poet Bairo (d. 1747), though, and when he was called back to Edo in 1747 to reunite with his family and attend his grandmother's memorial service, he was finally provided with a settled base from which to carry out his haikai activities over the next several years.

This period in Edo is described in chapter 4, "Haikai Master of Asakusa, Kyūroan Ryōtai: 1748-62." Marceau explains how the name of his new hermitage, the Kyūroan ("Dew-inhaling Hermitage") involves allusions to both the *Zhuangzi* and the "Li Sao," with the effect of combining the image of the Taoist hermit with that of the exiled loyal minister. He argues that this second allusion relates to Ayatari's self-image as a samurai who could not put

his talents to use in official service, and instead channeled them into the marginal world of literature. He also comments on the significance of Ayatari's new sobriquet, Ryōtai ("Cool Sack"), which alludes to the Wind Deity statue guarding the temple where he resided, as well as signifying his allegiance to the Ise School of haikai, many of whose members had the character "ryō" in their names. This declaration of school identity was a particularly strong statement given that he was in enemy territory, so to speak, as the plainer style of the more rural Ise School was at odds with the urbane wit dominant among Edo haikai poets. Ayatari was highly successful as a haikai teacher, as evidenced by his publication of thirty-six collections of his circle's haikai between 1747 and 1764. Never satisfied to simply stand still, he traveled to Nagasaki during this period to learn the latest Chinese painting techniques, and was able to gain employment as a painter-in-residence at a daimyo's Edo mansion. In addition to being a profitable career move for the ambitious Ayatari, Marceau argues, painting also provided him with something "elegant" (*ga*) to pursue as a counterbalance to the "common" (*zoku*) art of haikai.

Chapter 5, "A *Bunjin* is Born – Ayatari, Clan of Yamato Takeru: 1763-74," describes the final phase of Ayatari's career, in which he became involved, though his contacts with Kamo no Mabuchi's (1697-1769) school, in the nativist quest for the purity of ancient Japanese forms of linguistic and literary expression. One manifestation of this was his promotion of the *katauta*, an archaic 5-7-7 form that he put forth as an elegant alternative to the lowly haikai. This also gave rise to his new sobriquet, Takebe Ayatari. Marceau explains that "Ayatari" means "cultured person," while the "Take" of Takebe was taken from the name of Yamato Takeru, whose *katauta* from the *Kojiki* were cited as models by Ayatari. He notes that despite

the martial image many have of Yamato Takeru, it was in fact his literary side that led Ayatari to identify with him. Ayatari's newfound interest in ancient Japanese also found expression in a number of pseudoarchaic fictional prose works, which sometimes included interlinear notes or glossaries to explain the unfamiliar ancient language to contemporary readers.

Chapter 6, "Ken Ryōtai of the Cold-Leaf Studio: Ayatari as a Nagasaki School Painter and Promoter," breaks away from the chronological progression of the previous chapters and focuses on Ayatari's career as a painter, where he worked in the three genres of *haiga*, bird and flower painting, and landscape painting. Marceau discusses how Ayatari borrowed from Chinese motifs as well as Chinese theoretical ideas, such as the notion of grasping the general sense of what is being painted, rather than aiming at technical verisimilitude. At the same time, he points out how Ayatari used these as a launching point for his own creative endeavors, combining Chinese and Japanese motifs and mixing in elements not present in his models. Also, we see evidence of Ayatari's relentless self-promotion in his publication of five painting manuals, which enjoyed great popularity. This discussion of Ayatari's painting is aided by the inclusion in this chapter of more than eighty high-quality black-and-white reproductions of Ayatari's paintings (sixteen of which are reproduced again in color in a separate appendix), along with more than a dozen examples of the kinds of paintings (mostly Chinese) that he took as his models.

The conclusion presents a number of judgments of Ayatari from the Tokugawa period, and despite some differences, there is a general consensus that he was talented and spirited, but of somewhat dubious character and lacking in scholarly rigor. Marceau comments that Ayatari's reputation has suffered, in his own time and later, from how he "remained on the

fringes of the various expressive or intellectual movements of his time (including haikai, painting, and *kokugaku*) without successfully creating a movement at which he could occupy center stage” (p. 285). I would also add that the relative neglect of Ayatari in modern scholarship is symptomatic of a broader tendency in Tokugawa literary studies to focus on the one hand on the Genroku period, and on the other hand on the gesaku fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Nakano Mitsutoshi has pointed out, this pattern of canonization owes much to the value modern scholars have placed on *zoku* literature in the Tokugawa period.¹ An emphasis on using poetic elegance to rise above the *zoku* world, characteristic of the writers that Marceau describes as *bunjin*, can easily appear to the modern reader to be cliché-ridden and divorced from reality. As Marceau’s discussion of Ayatari demonstrates, though, this literature too was not only highly creative in its own way, but also very much rooted in Tokugawa society. Moreover, the literature that came before and after it sometimes shares more of its qualities than is immediately apparent, so a greater understanding of *bunjin* modes of expression ultimately helps to shed light on the more canonical Tokugawa writers as well.

Marceau’s choice to use the medium of biography to discuss Ayatari has both benefits and drawbacks. The story he provides of Ayatari’s life is to a large extent the story of Ayatari’s personal relationships, which results in a richly textured picture of the social context of his cultural production. We see how his literary and artistic endeavors were not just the product of an eccentric and solitary genius, but came into being within a complex world of literary politics in which legitimacy and

power were pursued through making and breaking alliances, courting patrons, recruiting disciples, and engaging in publishing activities. A weakness of the biographical approach is that at times it comes at the expense of textual analysis. This reader, at least, finished the book wanting to know more about some of Ayatari’s writings, particularly his late prose works. *Nishiyama monogatari* is available in English translation,² but a more in-depth discussion of such works as *Honchō suikoden* would have been appreciated. This and other of Ayatari’s works, as Marceau mentions, have recently become available in annotated editions in the *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, so this remains a promising area for future work on Ayatari.

This book is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on Tokugawa literature. It introduces the reader to multiple dimensions of an important but neglected figure, and shows how in his various pursuits he both manipulated and was shaped by the world of eighteenth-century cultural politics.

¹ He discusses this in *Jūhasseiki no Edo bungei* (Iwanami Shoten, 1999), pp. 2-19.

² Blake Morgan Young, “A Tale of the Western Hills: Takebe Ayatari’s *Nishiyama Monogatari*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 37:1 (1982): 77-121.