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Bashō’s Encounter with *Yūjo* in *The Narrow Road to Oku*¹

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1. Introduction

Bashō’s encounter with *yūjo* (遊女) is a topic related to my recent project called the “philosophy of pilgrimage.”² Pilgrimage is usually understood as a religious practice, but I would like to argue that it can be a way of doing philosophy. Here are the keywords of this philosophy:

Action: To know the world and make a difference.

Other: To face the other, which is not merely a philosophical concept.

Sympathy: To preserve memories and share historical pain.

Love: To remember the forgotten people and the dead.

Friendship: To stop being indifferent towards others.

I have been travelling with colleagues and students to places like Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima. These places have their own unique history, which cannot be reduced into textbooks or museum displays. Noe Keiichi, a contemporary Japanese philosopher, argues that “history” has a twofold meaning. “On the one hand, historians have to choose valuable events for description out of enormous historical materials. On the other hand, they have to exclude, delete, or forget insignificant events. In this sense, ‘history’ is a ceaseless struggle between memory and oblivion. Preserved memories from oblivion are organized into a historical narrative.”³

To give an example, he mentions Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)’s famous work *Oku no Hosomichi* (published posthumously in 1702). During his pilgrimage to Hiraizumi, Bashō recalls a celebrated poem by the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet Tu Fu (Du Fu 杜甫, 712–770):

The country has fallen but its rivers and mountains remain;
When spring comes to the city its grass turns green again.

¹ I would like to thank Yusa Michiko and Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt for their comments to the first draft of this paper.

² See my article “In the Wake of 3.11 Earthquake of 2011: Philosophy of Disaster and Pilgrimage” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp.133-149.

³ *Ibid*, p. 142.

Now Bashō composes this *haiku*:

The summer grasses —
For many brave warriors
The aftermath of dreams.

Noe explains, “Here, we notice, Bashō was recollecting the tragic narrative concerning the young general Yoshitsune Minamoto, who was killed by his elder brother’s troops. At the same time, he overlapped the ruins before his eyes with images of war in ancient China through citing Tu Fu’s poem. This double image is none other than the effect of narrative. Under the power of narrative, just an ordinary landscape wears collective memories and historical significance.”⁴

Last year, I was given an opportunity to deliver a talk in the International Seminar of Japanese Philosophy in UNAM, Mexico. My topic was “Philosophy and Earthquake: The Case of Japan.” In my talk, I mentioned Bashō’s visit to Ichiburi (市振), where he met two *yūjo* (遊女).

2. Bashō’s encounter of *yūjo* in Ichiburi

In *Oku no Hosomichi*, Bashō and Sora met two *yūjo* in an inn near the barrier of Ichiburi. Here I will quote Donald Keene’s English translation:

Today we [Bashō and Sora] passed through the most dangerous places in the north country, known as “Parents Forget Their Children,” “Children Forget Their Parents,” “Dogs Turn Back.” I was so exhausted that I drew my pillow to me and lay down as soon as we reached an inn. I could hear the voices of young women, probably two of them, talking in a room one removed from ours at the western end of the house. The voice of an old man also joined in the conversation, and I gathered from their words that the women were prostitutes from Niigata in Echigo Province. They were on their way to worship at the shrine in Ise, and the man had escorted them here, as far as the Barrier of Ichiburi. They would be sending him back the next day, and they were giving him letters they had written and trivial little messages to take back with him.

“We are wandering by the shores that the white waves wash. Daughters of fishermen, we have fallen to this miserable world. What terrible karma accounts for our inconstant vows, the sins we daily committed? We are wretched indeed...” These were the last words I heard before falling asleep.

The next morning, when we were about to start out, the two women approached us, saying, “We feel so uneasy and depressed at the thought of the difficulties

⁴ Ibid, pp. 142-143.

they may await us on the way to an unfamiliar place that we would like to follow behind you, even if out of sight. Grant us this great favor, you who wear the habit of priest, and help us to attain the way of the Buddha.” They were in tears. I answered, “I feel sorry for you, but we must stop at a great many places. You’d better go along with some ordinary travelers. You will be under the protection of the gods, and I am sure that no harm will come to you.” These were my parting words, but for a time I could not shake off my pity for them.

hitotsu ya ni	Under the same roof
yūjo mo netari	Prostitutes too were sleeping —
hagi to tsuki	The moon and clover.

I mentioned to Sora what I had composed, and he wrote it down.⁵

Of course, one may question why Bashō had to reject the request from *yūjo*, but Akasaka Norio points out a more serious problem. In his book, *Tōhoku Studies / The forgotten Tōhoku* (2009), Akasaka argues that Bashō’s problem is not only in his attitude towards *yūjo*, but also in his conception about Tōhoku.⁶ As a man interested in *haiku* writing, Bashō had no intention to care about the people in Tōhoku area. He might have actually met two *yūjo* there, but they were merely convenient objects for his poetry. Bashō might also have a motivation to visit Tōhoku, but to him this area has nothing interesting except *utamakura* (歌枕), which are places associated with classical literature such as Matsushima, Hiraizumi, Yamadera, Kusakata, etc. Indeed, Bashō’s trip can be regarded as “a journey to *utamakura*” (歌枕の旅). Akasaka writes,

Tōhoku, as the end of the road, has many exotic and marginal *utamakura* which can be traced back to the era of *Man’yōshū*. It is obvious that many destinations of Bashō’s journey, such as Matsushima and Kusakata, are well known *utamakura*. *The Narrow Road to Oku* is written with the “romanticism about the margins” (辺境へのロマン主義) as the mother’s womb.⁷

For Akasaka, this romanticism about the margins is one of the most important sources of imagination for Bashō’s poetry. In Kusakata, for example, Bashō takes the following note: “Kusakata, which is little more than two miles long and wide, reminded me of Matsushima; but there was a difference. Whereas Matsushima seemed to smile, Kusakata had a gloomy, bitter air. The lonely, melancholy scene evoked a troubled human soul.” Finally, he writes the following *haiku*:

⁵ Bashō, *Oku no Hosomichi*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, pp.107-109. However, the *haiku* is not found in Sora’s Diary.

⁶ Ichiburi is, strictly speaking, not in Tōhoku (North East) but in Hokuriku (North Land).

⁷ Akasaka, *Tōhoku Gaku / Wasurerareta Tōhoku*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2009, p.206.

Kitakata ya Kisakata–
ame ni Seishi ga Seishi sleeping in the rain,
nebu no hana Wet mimosa blossoms⁸

According to Akasaka, "...As if being spirited away, Bashō targets the north. However, the northern limits of Bashō's journey are Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture and Kisakata in Akita Prefecture. He did not visit the inner part of Tōhoku."⁹ Margin is always seen from a center. In Bashō's case, Tōhoku is seen through the eyes from the capital (都). "In any case, Bashō is precisely a traveler-poet who goes from the capital to the margin."¹⁰ Akasaka urges us to understand Tōhoku from a Tōhoku perspective, and farewell to Bashō's romanticism. In my talk, I concluded that we should visit places where Bashō did not visit, or has never thought of making a visit.

3. Translating "yūjo"

After my presentation, I received a question from Professor Yusa Michiko, who challenged the English translation of *yūjo* as prostitute. Later, I realized that D. T. Suzuki could be the first scholar who uses the word "prostitute" to translate *yūjo*. In *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1938), Suzuki writes, "When Bashō was traveling on the Narrow Road of Oku, he happened to meet two prostitutes on their way to the Ise Shrine, and they all stayed in the same inn." Suzuki explains,

Here is a solitary wandering poet with something of Zen aloofness; he meets prostitutes bound for Ise, where they are planning to worship at the shrine dedicated to the ancestral spirits of the Japanese race; he listens to their story of miseries and woes and karmic retributions; the poet is in full sympathy with them but does not know what to do in the condition in which all are situated; human iniquities, moral indignation, individual helplessness. With all this, Bashō is a nature poet. He sets the prostitutes as well as himself together with the bush clovers and the moon in the nature frame of transcendentalism. And the outcome is the seventeen-syllable haiku... The prostitutes are no more fallen specimens of humanity, they are raised to the transcendently poetic level with the lespedeza flowers in their unpretentious beauty while the moon impartially illuminates good and bad, comely and ugly. There is no conceptualization here, and yet the haiku reveals the mystery of being-becoming. ¹¹

⁸ Bashō, *Oku no Hosomichi*, p.112. Bashō did not write any *haiku* about Matsushima.

⁹ Akasaka, *Tōhoku Gaku*, p. 205.

¹⁰ Akasaka, *Tōhoku Gaku*, p. 205.

¹¹ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959, p.229.

Why Bashō had to include “*yūjo*” in his work? As a matter of fact, Bashō always wanted to follow the path of Saigyō 西行 (1118-1190), a monk who travelled across Japan and wrote poems. Therefore, it makes sense for Bashō to write something about *yūjo*, as Saigyō also met a *yūjo* in Eguchi (in Osaka).¹² Here, I will quote William LaFleur’s translation of Saigyō:

On the way to the temple called Tennō-ji, I [Saigyō] got caught in the rain. In the area known as Eguchi I asked at one place for a night’s lodging. When refused, I replied as follows:

yo no naka o	It is hard, perhaps,
itou made koso	To hate and part with the world;
katakaramae	But you are stingy
kari no yadori o	Even with the night I ask of you,
oshimu kimi kana	A place in your soon-left inn.

The response by a “woman-of-play”:

ie o izuru	It's because I heard
hito to shi kikeba	You're no longer bound to life
kari no yado ni	As a householder
kakaro tomuna to	That I'm loath to let you get attached
omou bakari zo	To this inn of brief, bought, stays. ¹³

The woman might have a reason to reject the monk’s request, as she was probably living in a quarter “where men could buy the sexual favors of courtesans or prostitutes (*yūjo*, ‘play-women’).”¹⁴ We should notice that LaFleur translated *yūjo* as courtesans, prostitutes, or “play-women.” In fact, *yūjo* has two characters: *yū* (遊) and *jo* (女), which can literally mean “playing” and “women.” However, the notion of “play” does not necessarily mean entertaining or sex. As argued by Saeki Junko, the notion of “play” offers deep cultural meaning and significance. She explains,

As the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga discusses in his *Homo Ludens*, the relationship between “play” and culture is one of the most important aspects of cultural history. In the case of Japanese culture, this relationship can best be examined in the history of courtesans, or “playing girls” (*yūjo*) as they are called in Japan, who embodied the original form of “play” and contributed to the

¹² Saigyō, *Saigyō: Tamashii no Tabi*, Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2010, pp.181-184

¹³ LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp.70-71.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.69.

development of culture in ancient times... The *Legends of Izumi Shikibu* and *Ono no Komachi* detailed the sacred character of courtesans. They were always paired with their respective traditional lovers; and in the tales of the two couples, the courtesans were portrayed as the ideal characters to symbolize the sacred power of sex and poetry. Along with the development of the licensed quarters, courtesans came to fall into various categories; and those of the first class (*tayū*) were often depicted in stories from the Edo period as the ideal women. However, courtesans led unhappy lives, contrary to the beautiful illusions about them. They were heartbroken when parted from their lovers, or despised themselves for their occupation. But their unhappy destiny meant not merely earthly suffering, but was also a way toward enlightenment. This explains why the combination of monks and courtesans often appears in folk tales.¹⁵

For Saeki, *yūjo* is more than a prostitute, but someone who offers love and dreams. She writes, “Throughout Japanese cultural history, courtesans have embodied the dreams of the people and have played an almost sacred role. This reveals to us the religious aspect of ‘play,’ which is now lost and forgotten, and sheds a new light on the history of women participating in the creation of culture. The traditional view regarding men in relation to culture and women in relation to nature is no longer valid.”¹⁶ For example, the *yūjo* of Eguchi, whom we have mentioned earlier, is not a person with a miserable life; rather, she could actually be a Bodhisattva.¹⁷

We can imagine that some *yūjo* could read classics and write poems, but it is rather difficult to judge if a *yūjo* is enlightened or not. Amino Yoshihiko, a well-known historian in Japan, mentions that some *yūjo* tried to meet Hōnen (the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan) for salvation.¹⁸ However, he also suggests women in Japan used to be thought to possess mysterious power and to travel freely without any restriction. In fact, the character *yū* (遊) does not only mean “play”, but also “travel.”¹⁹ In medieval period in Japan, people living in Japan could not travel freely, but permit could be granted if they were going on a pilgrimage to Ise Shrine. In this sense, *yūjo* can be understood as travelling women (旅する女性たち).²⁰ Of course, we should not over glorify the freedom of women. As mentioned by Amino, some of them might be kidnapped or even raped by monks.²¹

¹⁵ Saeki, *Yūjo no Bunkashi*, Tokyo: Chūōkōron Shinsha, 1987, pp 3-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.4.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.94.

¹⁸ Amino, *Nihon no Rekishi wo Yomigaeru*, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2005, p.176.

¹⁹ For examples, there are vocabularies such as 遊覧, 遊牧, 遊撃, 遊動, 遊民, etc.

²⁰ Amino, *Chūsei no Hinin to Yūjo*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2005, p.204.

²¹ Amino, *Nihon no Rekishi wo Yomigaeru*, p.153.

Amino also notices that *yūjo* 遊女 was used to be called *ukareme* 遊行女婦²², who could be a *miko* (巫女, a woman serving *kami* deity) or an elite. One example would be an *ukareme* in Daizaifu, who was a bureaucrat.²³

The idea of *ukareme* is explained by the Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio. He writes,

Yūjo was originally called *ukareme*. They are related to performers, who are called *asobi* (アソビ). Accidentally, this word is linked to the *kanji* character of "yu" or "asobu" (遊, to play). Later, it is not sure which one came first, but it becomes clear that *yugyō* (遊行) means a nomad way of living, as in the example of *yugyōshōnin* 遊行上人. It is not strange if a *ukareme* 遊行女婦 is traveling in the countryside.²⁴

Yanagita clearly says, the literal meaning of *yūjo* is “women who make living by traveling (旅行をもって生を営む婦女).” However, women later lost this social status. They might still manage to travel, but they were no longer elite. Concerning the *yūjo* in *Oku no Hosomichi*, Yanagita suggests that they might have managed to trigger the emotions of Bashō, but they have fallen to this miserable world with a terrible karma. With such a miserable life, he argues that “they would not be able to travel freely in the countryside.”

It is clear that *yūjo* has many different meanings, which cannot be reduced to mere prostitute. In her book *Prostitutes and Early Modern Society*, Sone Hiromi writes,

²² Amino, *Chūsei no Hijin to Yūjo*, p. 204

²³ Yanagita, *Mokumen izen no koto*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

"Ukarema" used to be thought to have the same meaning as *yūjo* or prostitutes, but according to recent researches on women's history, they were not prostitutes but a kind of bureaucrat. Indeed, it is pointed out that until the 9th century there were no women prostitutes. It is in the 10th century when prostitution was established, with words like "a woman who sells sex = yahochi 夜発" and "a woman who sells sex but also performs as entertainment = *yūjo* 遊女." It was much later when compared to China.²⁵

4. Concluding remarks

Bashō and Sora might have actually met two *yūjo* in Ichiburi. These two *yūjo* could have been prostitutes, but at least they managed to free themselves and became pilgrims. Therefore, the translation of *yūjo* in Bashō's haiku should be pilgrims (in the sense of 旅する女). If this is the case, we could provide another story of what happened in Ichiburi, based on the view point of *yūjo*.

The next morning, when we [*yūjo*] were about to start out, the two men [Bashō and Sora] approached us, saying, "We feel so uneasy and depressed that you two prostitutes are travelling to an unfamiliar place without any accompany. We would allow you to follow us, but keeping a distance since you are prostitutes. The two men, who thought they were helping us to be enlightened, imagined we would be in tears. But we answered, "Thank you for your sympathy. However, we are not prostitutes but pilgrims. We have the freedom to travel, with or without anybody. You'd better go along with other travelers who need your blessing. Yes, you may call us *yūjo*, but we are not prostitutes!"

As mentioned earlier, this paper was originally a response to Prof. Yusa's comments on the translation of *Yūjo* as prostitute, but I would like to deliver something extra: we should reclaim the notion of *yūjo*. *Yūjo* should not be regarded as a prostitute who has to please someone for a living; rather, *yūjo* can be anyone who wants to be free.

On June 20, Petula Ho Sik Ying, a professor at University of Hong Kong, delivered a speech titled "Carrie Lam, Bring Out the Freedom-Hi (Freedom Pussy) in You!"²⁶ She says,

I am Ho Sik Ying. I am a member of the hunger strike group who have just completed our 103 hours of protest. I am also one of the spokespersons for Gender and Sexual Justice in Action. We have some thought to share. The title is "Be a Freedom-Hi (Freedom Pussy), Not a Pro-establishment Pussy!." This t-shirt I am wearing says "Freedom-Hi." Why is there such a T-shirt? During the protest on June 12th some police forced the students to retreat to Pacific Place (a mall). At the door, a police officer hooted, "Come on out! Fuck your mother!

²⁵ Sone, *Shōfu to Kinsei Shakai*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2003, p. 12.

²⁶ Carrie Lam is the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

Freedom-Hi” to incite the people in the mall. There were people of both genders. Yet, pussy is literally referring to the female sex organ. It is commonly used as a swear word to express anger to another person. We don't know if that police officer was indeed so enlightened to know that each of our puppies are all “fighting for freedom.” According to the footage of the incident, some heard the officer said “pig pussy” instead of “Freedom-Hi. “Pig pussy” is also a very common Cantonese swear word, but a lot of women heard him said “Freedom-Hi.” Experts in acoustics have conducted several studies and attested that the officer uttered three syllables (in Cantonese). Therefore, he was probably saying “Freedom-Hi.” Today I would like to say, “We would rather be Freedom-Hi(s), not a pro-establishment pussy!” Happeriod and Chen Holok have already elaborated on why we should embrace and reclaim the term “Freedom-Hi.” Although “pussy” is an insult to women, just as members of LGBT also reclaim the derogatory terms such as “gay” or “queer.” They transformed oppression to empowerment. A pussy is commonly regarded as an object to be fucked, but we as people with pussies know that we won't stand being preyed of. We have the liberty to choose whether we want to be fucked (or fuck), whether to accept an apology, whether to resist, whether to act, or whether to accept any evil law. A “Freedom-Hi” will proactively pursue and fight for its happiness. And we want a better, freer and more democratic society. We are not pro-establishment pussies who do things for Beijing's approval. In this “Anti-China Extradition” movement, we witnessed the power of “Freedom-Hi” from Mothers of Hong Kong and Housewives Anti-Extradition Alliance. We, Kong Girls, stand together today. We ask Carrie Lam to step up and bring out the “Freedom-Hi” in her. Don't be complacent of your position as the Chief Executive, and be reductant to leave your role. Don't turn yourself into an old butt (corrupt and wedded to your authority). Carrie Lam graduated from the University of Hong Kong, and so did I. She worked very hard her whole life to get to where she is today. Recently, about two million people publicly protested against her, including her fellow alumni. We can imagine how humiliating this is for her. She feels she has failed miserably, but does not regret her actions. Being a career woman growing in the same era, I can imagine that she feels frustrated muddled. Therefore, I'd especially like to meet her today, to exhort her to take the last chance to bring out “Freedom-Hi” in her, to speak with integrity and stop shooting our young people. If you truly repents for her sins, she might still find her way to God's Kingdom.²⁷

In short, a male police used the Cantonese term 自由閹 to abuse protestors, but as Ho suggests, we should reclaim the word as in the cases of “gay” or “queer.” *Yūjo* can also be a Freedom-Hi.

According to Takigawa Masajirō, “In China, there are words such as 倡女, 妓女, 歌妓, but there is no such word as 遊女.”²⁸ However, in Chinese there is the term 遊行婦女, meaning women (婦女) participating in a march (遊行). Here, I am inspired by Ami

²⁷ Based on the Facebook Video posted on 25 June 2019 by Gender and Sexual Justice in Action.

²⁸ Takigawa, *Yūjo no Rekishi*, Tokyo: Shibundō, 1965, p.19.

Skånberg Dahlstedt, who is advocating a non-violent way of marching in the style of *suriashi* (摺足), originally a basic way of walking in Japanese dance. She argues,

At the Gothenburg Culture Festival in August 2016, the *Suriashi* Intervention had finally developed into a walking activism, in which independent dancers and artists walked with me for 90 minutes to raise awareness about the unpaid labour of female dancers. Walking in *suriashi* in a group of people was clearly a visible act, which had an immediate effect on the surroundings, and this time the involuntary audience reacted with appreciation, laughter, heckling and criticism. A male conductor came running from an outdoor stage and tried to silence our performance. His emotional reaction was an example of which impact *suriashi* might have as a social interaction and communication with urban space, and to me it became clear how *suriashi* could both help its participants to both blend in and to shout out loud in silence.²⁹

Women are marching for various reasons: to express their discontent with the male-dominated society, the lack of opportunities in education, poor efforts to save the environmental and endangered species, etc. Recently, in the “*Ni una menos* (not one less)” movement we can see millions of women peacefully occupied the streets in Latin American world. We should claim back the term 遊行婦女 for women who are marching proactively for freedom.

²⁹ Dahlstedt, “Suriashi a meditation on the local through artistic research,” in: L. Greenfield, M. Trustam (Eds.), *Artistic Research Being There. Explorations into the local*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2018, pp 49-52.