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# Ryokan

ZOTOHKA "Lotus Dew", Poems interchanged

By Minuro Shiraishi and Antonio Arana Soto

“Who says my poems are poems?  
My poems are not poems.  
When you ‘ll understand that,  
Then we can speak of poetry.”

Ryokan

*(Translation of John Stevens)*

“Lotus Dew”, is a collection of poems Teishin gathered and published after Ryokan death, the title is appropriate for each poem is a pearl as the dew on a lotus.

As far as Ryokan’s life of is concerned, we followed Ishigami-Iagolnitzer Mitichiko “Ryokan moine zen” (“Ryokan zen monk”), CNRS Publication, 1991. And few comments written in the bilingual edition of “Hachisu no tsuyu”, “La rosée d’un lotus” (“Lotus Dew”) from Alain-Louis Colas, Connaissance de l’orient, édition Gallimard, 2002, to whom we are grateful.

**Ryokan** was born in Izumozaki, a small seaside village with a small harbour, on the Northwestern coast of Japan. At the age of 18, he decided to enter the zen monastery Kosho-ji. Four years later he joined the zen Master Kokusen to Entsu-ji and was given the name Ryokan (*Good, large or vast*). He will bear several names during his lifetime.

He stayed twelve years with master Kokusen. When Kokusen passed away, he went on a pilgrimage throughout Japan, in different temples, particularly to consult the Shobogenzo, “*The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*”, the master work of Dogen (1200-1253).

He visited the farms and near by villages to beg for food, to meet people, to play ball with the children, constantly seeking to alternate between loneliness (seclusion) and socialization that complemented his daily life.

At the age of fifty-eight, he settled closer to the village in a hermitage of the Otoko temple, where he lived for the last five years of life.

At the age of sixty-nine he met Teishin, a zen nun, with whom he maintained close friendship and complicity until his death. Their relation is expressed in the “*Poems interchanged*”, some are presented hereafter.

**Teishin** was born in Nagaoka, under the name of Masu. She lost her mother when she was very young. Cheerfull, intelligent, she married a doctor when she was sixteen or seventeen, Seki. She divorced him five years later. At twenty-one, she was ordained nun and received the name Teishin (*Faithfull heart*). She heard about Ryokan and decided to meet him through a friend, married to Ryokan’s nephew.

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In the fall 1827, at twenty-nine, she met Ryokan and that will be the start of their friendship and poetic exchange of letters. In 1831 Ryokan died besides her, he was seventy-three. Teishin collected all his poems and published them under the name "*Lotus Dew*" - *Hachisu no tsuyu*.

Teishin passes away in 1872. She wrote "*Salted Seaweeds*" – Moshihogusa, collection of 550 poems. Her "*Jisei no uku*", poem to death, closes the interchanged poems of "*Lotus Dew*":

Waves come and go  
From the high sea  
It seems they come  
While they go.

Teishin

### The poetic work of Ryokan

Ryokan did not care much about his poetry. His poetry flowed in spontaneity inspired by his relationship with life, with his entourage, in the moment. "*My poems are not poems*," he said. He said also: "*I hate poetry of the poets, the calligraphy of calligraphers and food of the cooks*", praising for the spontaneity and the "naturalness" each art should be born with.

He left his poems to be born by the wind, he wrote on the sand, left them hanging up on trees, posted on walls, lying on the floor...

The following poem reflects his writing, flowing naturally, automatically, without intention:

The flower invites the butterfly without intention.  
The butterfly visits the flower without intention.  
The flower opens, the butterfly comes,  
the butterfly comes, the flower opens.  
I do not know the others.  
Others do not know me.  
Without knowing us, both follow  
the rhythm of nature.

Ryokan cultivates the style Man.yo with an atmosphere based on the traditional Japanese poems of Man.yoshu. The style is simple and straightforward on topics such as nature, love, separation, wine and celebrations, sorrow and sadness because of the impermanence of things.

His first poems were published in 1812 when he was 54 years old in an anthology of Iwata Shuhi ("Faithful association with gulls"). In 1815 a manuscript is published: "Ryokan Zenji Kastsu" (Anthology of poems by Master Ryokan). In 1818 a first biography is published, written by Buncho : "Ryokan zenji den" ("Life of Zen Master Ryokan").

In February 1831, Ryokan died beside Yusi, Teishin and his disciple Encho.

In 1835 Teishin published "Lotus Dew" that revealed Ryokan. Dew is an image often used in zen, it refers to mujo, impermanence, the floating and wavering world, mentioned by Ryokan in several poems.

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## Some interchanged poems

*When I heard that the master loved to play ball, I sent this poem attached to a ball that I had sewn myself.*

In an endless game  
Enjoying your practice,  
You play with a ball  
In the world of Buddha.  
I would also play with you  
In the infinite depth  
Of his law.

Teishin

His answer:

Try and play yourself  
One two three four five  
and six seven eight nine and ten  
And when you end up counting,  
Start again!"

Ryokan

*After we first met*

Was it really you  
I saw?  
Or is this joy  
I still feel  
only a dream?

Teishin

His answer:

In this dream world  
It is a dream  
To talk of dreams.  
Dream, dream on  
entrusted to the heart  
of every moment.

Ryokan

*When I tell her about my progress beyond duality*

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The Buddha Way  
Is just  
as it appears  
nothing you can touch  
with your hands.

Ryokan

My answer:

In the spring breeze  
melts the snow of the mountain,  
but the stream water  
stagnates between the rocks.

Teishin

His answer:

If the snow  
of the mountain melted,  
why the valley stream water  
should stagnate?

Ryokan