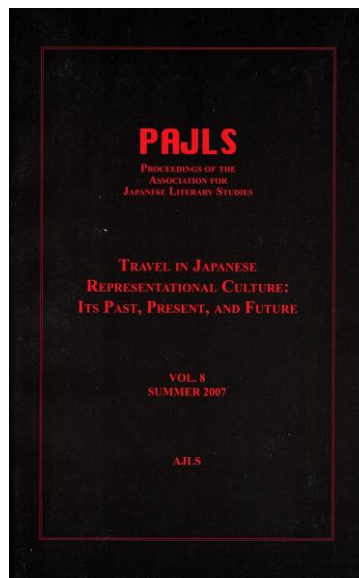


“Some Characteristics of Premodern Japanese
Travel Literature”

Herbert Plutschow

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 8 (2007): 26–33.



PAJLS 8:
*Travel in Japanese Representational Culture: Its Past,
Present, and Future.*
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF PREMODERN JAPANESE TRAVEL LITERATURE

Herbert Plutschow
Josai International University

After I advanced to Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University, New York, in 1966 I embarked on a journey to Japan in order to start my Ph.D. dissertation research on medieval Japanese travel diaries. Before leaving New York, my teacher Donald Keene suggested I consult Professor Noma Koshin of Kyoto University, a giant in the study of Edo-period Japanese literature, assuring me that Noma Koshin's office would be one of the best starting point of my research. I did not want to waste any time; so soon after my arrival in Japan I went to see Noma Koshin. He received me in his office wearing his brown kimono and sitting, as it were, on his two tatami mats, squeezed between the giant bookshelves. "What do you want to study?" He asked me. "Medieval Japanese travel diaries," I responded, bewildered by his unceremonious question. "Are you moved by reading travel diaries?" "Not really," I said expecting someone liked Noma Koshin to realize that not all works of literature are meant to move one to tears and that one can study literature as an anthropological cultural phenomenon. "If this type of literature fails to move you, you should abandon your project. This is not the kind of literature that deserves being introduced to the West." I persevered in my endeavor and never sought Noma Koshin's advice again.

The fact that medieval travel literature attracted mostly non-mainstream scholars who published in obscure journals made my initial research difficult. Fortunately, I realized early on in my research that Robert Brower and Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry* (1975) approach to this literature would yield only minor if not disappointing results and that one must try understand this type of literature as an eclectic one, combining imperial poetry with religious pilgrimage, that is, literature and religion. This made me realize the importance of religious poetry as in Jien's (1155–1225) private collection entitled *Shugyokushu* and the travel poetry of Priest Saigyō (1118–1190). I also felt that a study of medieval travel as a religious, historical and economic phenomenon would help one evaluate the type of literature under investigation. This brought me together with some outstanding scholars; Mitani Eiichi, Yamada Shōzen, Gorai Shigeru, and members of the Origuchi Shinobu and the Yanagita Kunio school.

A difficulty I encountered early on in my study was trying to map-out the field, investigating how many travel diaries exist, where they are as manuscripts or in print, who wrote the anonymous ones, trying to classify them according to purpose of travel, purpose of writing about travel, style (*wabun* Japanese or *kanbun* Chinese or mixed), the relations of poetry and prose that made up most of this literature, poetic rhetoric, and perhaps most importantly, whether the writer wrote about real and not imaginary travel at home and, if someone wrote a travel diary at home, I needed to address the problem as to why Japanese classical literature made fictional travel possible.

This last question was for me a crucial one. Travel has been a traditional category of imperial poetry, and travel appears as a rubric in practically all the twenty-one imperial collections of poetry (compiled between 905 and 1433). The fact that most of this poetry was filled with stereotypical imagery and conventions to the extent that thousands were composed and included in the authoritative imperial anthologies by poets who most likely never ventured outside the capital Kyoto was a mind-boggling problem, and I wondered why pre-modern Japanese literature sanctioned such a poetry. One would think that the emperors and their judges would prefer poetry composed on actual and not fictional, “pretended” travel. Such inquiry opened my eyes to the importance of *utamakura* (lit. poem pillow).

The famous places of poetry (*utamakura*) are perhaps the most important single element that made fictional travel literature possible. While scholars are still debating about the origins of the *utamakura*, we know that by the late tenth and early eleventh century, lists of *utamakura* were available to travel poets. Indeed, learning how to compose a successful travel poem was a way to educate future imperial poets in the art of poetry. At least we know that the nun Abutsu (–1283) wrote her *Izayoi Nikki* (1279–1280) not so much as a record of an arduous, allegedly solitary journey by a women from Kyoto to Kamakura, but as a pamphlet of teaching her sons the art of composing travel poetry. Nothing seems to suggest in this diary that the nun Abutsu actually undertook this journey. Her diary could well have been written at home.

The fact that the *utamakura* conventions shaped travel poetry and travel diaries from the Heian (794–1185) into the modern period bespeaks of an astounding cultural stability and continuity. The Fuwa Barrier (roughly between Shiga and Gifu prefectures) first built in the seventh century fell into ruin after 789. This is of course quite possible, considering the fact that many of the barriers built in the seventh century were no longer used in the eighth. But what is unthinkable is that it was

these ruins and not the building or rebuilding that remained unchanged until the Meiji period (1868–1912) and beyond. Were it not for this convention permanently attached to the barrier, Ota Nanpo (1749–1823), humorous poetry (kyōka) poet and the author of a travel diary entitled *Jinju Kiko*, could have never mentioned that he found at the site a shabby hut with a “For Sale” sign on it.¹ One can say the same of the Mt. Utsu (Utsunoyama, presently Shizuoka prefecture) where sometimes in the ninth century the poet Ariwara no Narihira (825–880), hero of the *Ise Monogatari* (Tales of Ise, mid-Heian period) met two itinerant monks, a tradition that kept reappearing in travel literature until the Meiji period (1868–1912).

One can go so far as to suggest that there was in premodern Japanese travel literature a set seeing determined by the poetic traditions of the imperial *waka*, a form of poetry consisting of five lines of five, seven, five, seven, seven syllables. This means that if a traveler chose to include *waka* in his or her travel diary, his or her vision of the world of travel was restricted by the rhetorical traditions of travel *waka*. Such a traveler is likely to mention the dilapidated state of the Fuwa Barrier and to meet itinerant monks at Mt. Utsu.

Many *kanbun* authors describe, say, Mt. Fuji as if it were a mountain in China. Likewise, there are humorous travel records such as Asai Ryōi's (–1691) *Tokaido Meisho Ki* and Shikitei Sanba's (1776–1822) celebrated *Tokaidochu Hizakurige* (translated into English under the title *Shank's Mare*) which, as a possible extension of the funny verses called *kyōka*, produce an often down-to-earth humor. Asai Ryōi's use of the place name Hodogaya as a pun for diarrhea may serve as an example. The choice of style determines the way in which Edo-period travelers looked at things.

The roads were so much preordained that mentioning a sight however beautiful was inadmissible had it not been mentioned before. Like so much else in Japanese imperial culture, precedence legitimizes. Though a *haiku* (a three-line poem of five, seven, five syllables) poet, Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) traveled on a road of poetic tradition when he wrote his *Oku no Hosomichi* (translated into English under the title *Narrow Road to the Deep North*), and he used fiction to mention Ishinomaki, a non-*utamakura* place.² Likewise one may wonder why some of the scenic beauty of the Tokaido (post-road between Kyoto and Kamakura, later Edo) that strikes us most nowadays, never made it into

¹ Ota Nanpo *Zenshu*, 8, (Tokyo, 1986) pp. 278–79.

² *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikai*, 84, *Bashō Bunshū*, p. 84.

the travel diaries and one may wonder again and again why each traveler failed to discover for himself, for his generation and for posterity some of the truly beautiful scenes along the celebrated road.

Basho took over from his poetic predecessors the equally strange custom to ignore traveling companions, writing his diary in the first person singular as if traveling alone. This convention may stem from the stereotype to present traveling as the alienating and solitary experience of leaving home, the imperial capital. The Western traveler may prefer to use “we” even though the companion or companions were servants of lower status. Nevertheless, such I-centered travel writing also exists in the West. The linked-verse (*renga*) poets, however, were unable to ignore their human relations along the way given the importance in *renga* of composing poetry together with others.

While many Edo-period travel authors maintained these traditions, a new, more realistic travel literature appears as early as the seventeenth century in response perhaps to the thirst for information that developed in the growing urban centers of Japan. Responding to such needs, Kaibara Ekiken (also Ekken, 1630–1714) wrote over thirty travel diaries indicating distances, judging the quality of the roads and inns, describing, often in relation with their history, villages, towns and sites, as well as the traditional *utamakura* places he found along the roads he traveled. Ekiken’s travel records were widely read by people who availed themselves of the flourishing printing industry and ambulant libraries. It was in his time that many Japanese became aware of being Japanese, living in the confines of a country they wanted to better know and understand. The Japanese were beginning to discover their own country.

The eighth shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751) contributed much to this process by ordering a survey of national resources, medicinal herbs and minerals in particular. He ordered his pharmacist Uemura Masakatsu (1695–1777) to travel the country in search of new medicinal herbs. The results were the first comprehensive surveys of Japan and reports of local customs and beliefs, pharmacology (*honzogaku*) including local culture and folklore. Such endeavors led to much updating of the old *Fudoki* gazetteers.³ While some scholars try to attribute such endeavor to post-Yoshimune Western influence, others try trace it back to Ming-dynasty Chinese surveys and the resulting encyclopedia. Edo-period Japanese learned much from the Chinese Neo-Confucian emphasis on scientific investigation and classification as a legitimate means to cultivate one’s morality.

³ Initially compiled on orders of the Empress Genmei in the year 913.

The fact that many an Edo-period traveler was a herbalist-physician and the new vision of reality the medical profession helped engender can hardly be ignored. Kaibara Ekiken, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), Tachibana Nankei (1753–1805), Sugae Masumi (1754–1829), Furukawa Koshoken (1726–1807), they were all doctors and travel authors who contributed to a more realistic travel writing, inheriting much from the combined pharmacological and folkloric tradition their predecessors had started. One of the great pioneers in Japanese folklore, Sugae Masumi was an herbalist who produced a medicine that was sold until the early twentieth century.

That the West inspired some travel observation is beyond doubt if one takes authors such as Tachibana Nankei and the painter Shiba Kokan (1747–1818) into account. Nankei introduced the microscope and telescope to his readers not only as wondrous instruments, but as devices that engender a new vision of things.⁴ Kokan's interest in world geography is well known but less so the philosophical conclusions he drew from it to introduce a new way of seeing reality. Interest in Western geography and cartography led to an interest in the yet underdeveloped Japanese geography and to such amazingly accurate maps of Japan as the one produced by Nagakubo Sekisui (1717–1801) and Ino Tadataka (Chukei, 1745–1818). It also led to the first Japanese geographic explorations, including the northern territories Ezo and beyond of Mogami Tokunai (1754–1836) and Mamiya Rinzo (1775–1844) from whom the Bavarian Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) learned so much.

New ways to observe reality may not have been possible without a greater sense of self. Much Edo-period travel writing is squarely self-centered. The individual more than some preordained rhetorical tradition assumes center stage. Realistic observation and individualism seem to go together in ways that need further study. Of course, the interaction of individualism and realism in terms of the different ways we conceive reality from generation to generation, needs to be defined. Furukawa Koshoken, for example, was a staunch individualist who tried to look at reality in a new way. "This is nonsense!" "Only believe in what you see in front of your eyes!" Repeating these rules he set for himself and others, Koshoken ended up rejecting all religious mystery, he believed spread out like a dog's barking followed by other dogs. He refused to see anything mysterious in the volcanoes and their eruptions. Koshoken and

⁴ His *Toyuki* is included, among others, in the *Nihon Shomin Seikatsu Shiryo Shusei*, 20 (Tokyo, 1972).

Kokan's agnosticism is the result of a more realistic, scientific vision of things. Individualism did engender a debate as to how much personal observation should be allowed in public writing, as between Sugae Masumi and Furukawa Koshoken,⁵ but both writers seem to occupy center-stage of the observed world regardless of what they considered public or private. What differs between the two is the critical spirit by which Koshoken confronts non-scientific, non-verifiable data. Masumi accepts cultural facts less critically, reporting data regardless of how irrational it may be.

However realistic Edo-period travel writing may have become, travelers strangely ignore certain needs all travelers confronted. They do mention traveling companions, but leave change of dress, the need to wash clothes, loincloths, unmentioned. Urination and defecation are left to imagine, except the diarrhea Matsuura Takeshiro (1760–1841) mentioned in connection with Ainu healing and the danger of drinking water from wells and rivers. The change of straw sandals was perhaps taken so much for granted that they all leave them unmentioned. Shiba Kokan and Hishiyama Heishichi (dates unknown) elaborate on the quality of food and female companions at the post stations, but common travel accoutrement such as folding pillows and candle stands are omitted as if they did not exist.

One may wonder what relation linked Edo-period realism and the schools of thought such as Neo-Confucianism, Native Studies (*Kokugaku*), Western Studies (*Rangaku*) and others. Were our travelers loyal adherents of specific schools of thought? The answer is no. They all were intellectually eclectic at least at the time they traveled, combining more than one school. I mentioned the importance of pharmacology and geography in creating a new more realistic vision. Yet, neither the pharmacology nor the geography belong to any specific school. In Motoori Norinaga we discover much later Native School thinking combined as it were by a scientific approach to geography and history and Sugae Masumi seems to have been driven by the Native School but also, indirectly at least, by encyclopedic surveying typical of the Neo-Confucian tradition. We find traces of pro-imperial political thinking in Tachibana Nankei, Sugae Masumi and Takayama Hikokuro (1747–93), but such trends did not lead, in their travel writings, to prejudiced distortion of geographical and historical facts in support of a single ideology, Motoori Norinaga's fundamentalist belief in the infallibility of text over geographical reality being a notable exception.

⁵ *Sugae Masumi Zenshu*, 10 (Tokyo, 1974) p. 396.

How do the above observations relate to European travel writings of, say, the enlightenment? Can we detect in Edo-period travel writing evidence of an early Japanese modernism? These questions need to be addressed because we cannot dismiss this writing as feudal or simply as premodern. Comparing the kind of realistic travel writing that appeared in the Edo period, one cannot ignore the similarities with European enlightened travel of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We may even find that some of our Edo-period travelers were in fact more modern than enlightened European travelers. I would certainly place Sugae Masumi into this category because the kind of detailed descriptions he offers us of the Tohoku (northeastern portion of Japan's main island) and Ezo (present Hokkaido) appear in Europe, for example, the Alps, only later. Also, one may not discover, not even in European enlightenment, a person like Koshoken willing to reject all religion for the sake of science. Motoori Norinaga's scientific attempts to verify data, though sometimes, ideologically prejudiced, compares with enlightened Europe.

One may find among the enlightened Japanese travelers, an observation and reporting that surpasses and predates European enlightenment. Sugae Masumi's recording of local legends in situ seems to comply with the present-day collection of ethnological data better than, for example, the Grimm brothers who preferred to collect their data in the comfort of their city apartment rather than traveling to their sources.

The humanism we discover in the travel writings of Watanaba Kazan (1793–1841) also testifies to the kind of modernism that developed in the Edo period. Compare the lack of prejudice in the descriptions of Ainu culture we find in, say, Sugae Masumi, Furukawa Koshoken and Matsuura Takeshiro with Meiji-period Ainu discrimination! These Edo-period travelers discovered for their readers a racially and culturally diverse Japan. They listed the local dialects, Ainu vocabulary, sketched unusual tools and plants they encountered along their ways. They respected the cultural diversity they encountered here and there in Japan. *Vis-à-vis* such travel writers the “enlightened” Meiji period seems a regression of the kind we also discover in the kind of romantic nationalism that replaced enlightened thinking in Europe.

There is also something intrinsically modern in the “salon” networks we discover in a number of Edo-period travel writing. Travelers were usually well received in the local communities who welcomed and sometimes retained them for days, weeks, even months, to gather from them information about the rest of Japan and instruction of cultural

know-how—the art of poetry, painting, geography, etc.—testifies to the thirst of knowledge, local attempts to bridge local with central culture, and to keep track of the most recent developments. Travelers like Sugae Masumi and Shiba Kokan were well paid for their services along the way and were thus able to finance the continuation of their journeys. One gets the impression of an increasingly unified nation, a nation created more by a human network of travelers than by an increasingly outmoded feudal political system.