

**Exploring *Nagusamegusa* (1418): the Semiotics of Encounter and
Exchange for a Poet-traveller in Muromachi Japan**

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The paper applies the LibrAsia 2012 conference theme of ‘exchanges and encounters’ to a fifteenth-century Japanese travelogue, *Nagusamegusa* (‘Grasses of Consolation’, 1418), by the influential poet and Zen priest Shōtetsu (1381-1459). On a number of levels we can find in this work a great richness and diversity of exchanges and encounters; here the paper examines two types of encounters for their encoded significance in historical, social and cultural terms.

Firstly, on a concrete level, Shōtetsu's travel from Kyoto to sojourn in the provinces brings him into contact with a surprisingly colourful cast of characters representing many different strands of Muromachi society—peasants of various kinds, woman peddlars, merchants, travellers, various types of clerics and warriors.¹ In particular he is welcomed and hosted by a local feudal magnate at Kiyosu Castle² who is keen to benefit from his literary credentials and

¹ The pages of the travelogue provide us with vivid documentary evidence of what scholars describe as the ‘Muromachi optimum’: ‘[F]or the half century from the cessation of widespread hostilities in 1368 until the famine of 1420, residents entered an age [...] when the new shogunate was at its height and social and economic expansion most vigorous.’ (Farris 2006, p. 95.) No more vividly does the reader encounter the ‘Muromachi optimum’ than in the following vignette from the journal, where Shōtetsu describes the castle town of Kiyosu: ‘The next day [...] I arrived at a place which seemed to be the very centre of this province. Here I discovered all manner of residences and similar dwellings, with people rushing around on provincial and district business, zealously looking after the needs of their peasants from dawn to dusk—it was as busy as a market town. I felt utterly as if I was back in the capital.’ (*Nagusamegusa*, in Nagasaki 1994, pp. 439-440.) All subsequent quotations from *Nagusamegusa* refer to this edition as translated by the author.

² Kiyosu Castle was located in present-day Kiyosu-chō, Nishi-Kasugai-gun, Aichi Prefecture, in

connections as a *waka* poet. The paper interprets this encounter in terms of the highly transitional, symbiotic and socially mobile characteristics of Muromachi society, the penetration of the culture of the capital into the provinces, and warrior uptake of aristocratic tradition.

The journey is also one where, in his passage through a geographical locale, Shōtetsu encounters and responds to the cultural landscape of the literary past: in this journey the stages of his travel are marked by tributes to *utamakura*, or places famed in poetry; his need to compose poetry at such richly literary sites show his culturally determined drive to construct a 'proper' identity for himself as a poet in the classical mode through interaction with the canonised voices of the past.

Thus the paper uses the content of a historical and literary document, *Nagusamegusa*, as a vehicle to demonstrate the semiotics of encounter and exchange. It will focus on the two aspects indicated above, and their significance:

- Shōtetsu's encounter with the warriors of Kiyosu Castle;
- Shōtetsu's encounter and exchange with the cultural landscape of his journey

Firstly, before addressing the first aspect, it will be helpful to provide a short

the centre of the Owari Plain. Kiyosu was the territory of the Oda clan; Oda Nobunaga became lord of Kiyosu Castle in 1555, and it became the base from which he set out to unify Japan. The castle town of Kiyosu developed as a post town on the Mino highway (*Nihon kokugo daijiten*). The castle is said to have been built in the early Muromachi period by powerful Shiba Yoshishige (some other sources give the date 1405), and the present castle was reconstructed in 1989 (Kiyosu Castle, 2012).

description of *Nagusamegusa*, and some social information about the narrator of the travelogue, Shōtetsu.

Nagusamegusa is a literary diary completed by Shōtetsu in 1418. It is the account of his travels from the capital part way along the Nakasendō³ around the shores of Lake Biwa, through the mountains to the northeast of Lake Biwa and eventually reaching the town of Kiyosu, in the western part of present-day Aichi Prefecture. Only about four or five days of his trip were spent on the road, but the journal itself covers a span of about four months, mostly relating his stay in Kiyosu, where Shōtetsu was accommodated in a Zen hall ‘Bamboo Shadows’ in the castle precinct. During his stay at Kiyosu Castle he is prevailed upon to give an impromptu lecture on *The Tale of Genji* and a complete reading of the work. The journal was written retrospectively, at the request of Shōtetsu’s young lover at Kiyosu castle, a warrior youth, to accompany a booklet of poems with commentary from *The Tale of Genji* which Shōtetsu had compiled. A substantial section of the journal lyrically recounts this relationship.

Of the author, we know that at the time the travelogue was written, Shōtetsu was a Zen monk, and had recently retired from the position of *shoki* (secretary) at the great Rinzai Zen temple of Tōfukuji in Kyoto. Socially as a priest or monk his status was somewhat ambiguous, and on the margins of the mainstream hierarchy (Shino, 2006, pp.34-38).

In fact, purely in terms of birth Shōtetsu was of quite humble origins, born as he was a commoner (*jige*) from the middle echelons of the provincial landed

³ This was the normal route to Kamakura in the medieval period, passing through Yamashiro, Ōmi, Mino, Owari, Mikawa, Tōtōmi, Suruga, Izu and Sagami provinces (Shōgaku tosho gengo kenkyūjo 1990, 176-177). The section travelled by Shōtetsu roughly corresponds with the route followed by the Shinkansen between Kyoto and Nagoya.

warrior gentry. His grandfather, or possibly his father, Hidekiyo, had been the first lord of Kōdoyama castle, in Odanoshō (the Oda estate), Bitchū province (the western part of present-day Okayama Prefecture) after being appointed *jitō* (estate steward) by the Ashikaga shogun and taking up residence in Oda in 1368, where he governed four villages (Inada 1978, pp. 22-23). During Kamakura times the *jitō* had been the 'major local figure' (Hall and Mass 1974, p. 256), but after the formation of the Ashikaga Bakufu, the power of the *jitō* declined and real power in the provinces steadily moved into the hands of the *shugo*, the provincial military governor (Hall and Mass 1974, pp. 182-183).

However, Shōtetsu was not particularly disadvantaged by this provincial start in life, thanks to the combination of shogunal policy and some fortunate real-estate decisions by his parents. When he was about ten, his family were obliged to re-locate to the capital, in response to shogunal requirements for provincial lords to return to the capital and establish their households there on a semi-permanent basis (Hall and Mass 1974, p. 27). Their new home was on Sanjō-Higashi no Tōin (*Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 104, in Hisamatsu and Nishio, 1961), a major avenue running south to north through Kyoto, just opposite the residence of Imagawa Ryōshun, who was one of the most important and powerful political and military figures of the day as well as an eminent poet and champion of the Reizei school. Shōtetsu's home was also only about half a mile from the quarter between Ichijō Avenue and Sanjō Avenue where were concentrated the residences of the military elite—the Hatakeyama, the Shiba, the Hosokawa, the Yamana and the Isshiki—as well as the imperial palace and the Ashikaga headquarters (Hall and Mass 1974, Figures 1.2 and 1.7).

From about this age Shōtetsu began associating with both the military elite and the court. At the age of twelve, we learn from an entry in *Sōkonshū*, he saw a huge chrysanthemum at the palace of retired Emperor Fushimi and was so struck by its beauty that he was moved to plant an identical chrysanthemum in his own garden over forty years later (Inada 1978, pp. 32-33). Aged about fourteen, Shōtetsu attended his first monthly poetry meeting, held by a group of Reizei-school poets at Imagawa Ryōshun's (1326-c.1417) residence (*Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:104).

Already, therefore, long before taking the tonsure in about 1414,⁴ Shōtetsu was acquiring a hybrid identity, domestically warrior, but culturally gravitating towards court and the aristocratic tradition. In this regard his role model was in all likelihood his teacher and mentor Imagawa Ryōshun, the consummate blend of the martial (*bu*) and the literary arts (*bun*). He was also close to Reizei Tamemasa (1361-1417), the head of the Reizei house and poetic line.

His decision to take monastic vows, and then four years later to become a wanderer in the tradition of poet-priest Saigyō (1118-1190), further enhanced his ability to associate with both classes and act as a cultural conduit between them. The following remarks from *Nagusamegusa* underscore the flexibility conferred by ambiguity:

People can tell that I am not a rough warrior, but puzzle over my real identity. I am like a bat, neither bird nor mouse. I have attended the jewelled courtyards of the highborn, and stayed in the humble dwellings of common people. (*Nagusamegusa*, p. 430)

⁴ A poem written on *kaishi* (loose leaves of paper) which refers to his 'charcoal monk's robes' (*sumi no koromo*) is dated 1414: from this we can adduce that he had already taken the tonsure by this time (Tanaka 1977, p.19). He would have been about thirty-three.

It was in this capacity therefore that he made his journey and eventually reached Kiyosu at the end of the fourth lunar month, where he stayed for three-and-a-half months. And it is the encounter which took place here which is quite remarkable, not for high drama, but as a first-hand account unequivocally documenting the process by which the warrior class accomplished their uptake of the warrior tradition.

The journal, true to the idealised image of the wanderer established in its introductory paragraph—‘I left the capital to wander, “like floating weeds drawn by the waters,” entrusting myself to merciful fate’ (*Nagusamegusa*, p. 430)—depicts his stay in Kiyosu as being unplanned. But in all likelihood the castle was his destination from the outset. As Plutschow remarks (1982, p. 7): ‘Many linked verse poets, apparently reluctant to make their diaries official accounts, did not mention their invitations as the reason for their journeys.’ Such invitations, however, were not out of the ordinary:

famous poets were often invited by such provincial magnates, who welcomed every opportunity to import the refined culture of the capital. Poets were lavishly treated by their hosts, who supplied them with transport (horses, palanquins, boats, etc.) assuring a minimum of comfort and security. (Plutschow, p. 50)

Furthermore Kiyosu Castle was in the hands of the Oda clan, at this point in history retainers of the powerful Shiba clan whose patronage Shōtetsu enjoyed,⁵ and who may have provided the introductions necessary for his visit there. It had been built quite recently, possibly in 1405. Later Kiyosu Castle became the

⁵ For example, Shiba Yoshimasa (1350-1410), referred to in *Nagusamegusa* p. 450.

headquarters of Oda Nobunaga in his conquest of Japan. No details are provided about Shōtetsu's immediate reception at Kiyosu Castle. He arrives in the company of an elderly lay priest (*ubasoku*) he has encountered on the way, and is accommodated in a Zen hall elegantly named 'Bamboo Shadows', where a couple of other monks were already staying. A telling description of the castle is provided, indicative of the extent to which a synthesis of the warrior and the aristocratic was already in progress:

There is a watchtower and a palisade, designed to defend from enemy attack and deter bandits. Once inside everything is similarly elegant, with a green for archery and arbour⁶ for *kemari*. West of the main *shinden* hall stands another building at the end of a gallery. Its name is 'Bamboo Shadows' [...]. (*Nagusamegusa*, pp. 440 -441)

His first reference to meeting the lord of Kiyosu Castle occurs some paragraphs later:

One day the lord of this residence addressed me, saying 'Well now, I have been informed that you are very knowledgeable about *The Tale of Genji*. For a long time, despite lacking any special talent, one of my interests was *renga* poetry but recently I have given up, too caught up in everyday business and unable to concentrate on this artistic pursuit, turning out poetry which is boring and uninspired. Even so I would like to hear about the history of this tale. Please would you be able to oblige, even if only a small part?' (*Nagusamegusa*, pp. 442-443)

And so Shōtetsu is urged to expound on aspects of the scholarship surrounding *The Tale of Genji*, and eventually cajoled to conduct readings of the entire work:

⁶ *Kakari*. The acme of elegance: refers to trees with spreading branches planted on all four sides of a ground for *kemari*, or by extension the *kemari* ground itself (*Iwanami kogo jiten*). Normally a cherry tree would be planted in the northeast, a willow in the southeast, a pine in the northwest and a maple in the southwest (*Nihon kokugo daijiten*).

‘We read it aloud little by little, just whenever we had spare time. We finally finished it this autumn.’ (*Nagusamegusa*, p. 444.)

Full details of who attended these gatherings are not provided, apart from the lord of the castle, and a youth accompanying a group of travellers breaking their journey from the east to Koshi,⁷ possibly travelling to another Shiba domain in Echizen province. We can also assume they were probably a warrior group on some particular business, while the youth was a page in attendance. But this is the moment that we witness the transmission of the aristocratic culture to the warrior class taking place. The eagerness of this group of warriors to embrace the trappings of metropolitan culture is palpable in the pressure they have placed on Shōtetsu to share his knowledge; nowhere is this more apparent than in the entreaties of their page. His aspirations to high culture speak through the observation that

the boy [...] was interested in *renga* poetry and [...] his handwriting held much promise. He would come here with others and to my embarrassment ask endless questions. He was always asking me the meaning of vague *waka* poems and I tried to explain to him even though frustrated by my own stupidity. (*Nagusamegusa*, p. 445)

Before long Shōtetsu had developed a special relationship with this boy and was eventually persuaded by him to write a copy of all the poems in *The Tale of Genji* with commentary. We do not know the identity of the boy, but presumably this enhanced cultural capital benefitted his career in one way or another.

Let us now turn to the second dimension of encounter and exchange to which I referred above. This denotes the symbolically loaded encounters which

⁷ The provinces of Echizen, Etchū and Echigo located on the west (Japan Sea) coast of Honshu.

Shōtetsu experiences at certain places on his journey, construed in this instance as literary and cultural coordinates of the ritual landscape referred to in classical Japanese poetics as *utamakura*. These places are especially conspicuous in the first few pages of the diary. The concept of *utamakura* had existed in poetics since the Heian period, as indicated by the categorisation of *utamakura* compiled by Heian poet Nōin (998-1050) known as *Nōin utamakura*. *Utamakura* denote places redolent with symbolic significance in the classical poetic canon, reference to which in poetry prescribed the usage of specific imagistic conventions. As Shōtetsu travels from the capital to the provinces, he refers to a succession of such toponyms.⁸ At each he offers one poem:

- Ausaka Barrier
- Shiga no ura
- Moruyama
- Kagamiyama
- Oiso
- Ono
- Fuwa Barrier

It is not possible here to share all the poems, and detail the evocations and significance of each of these places. Let us take just one example, the first which appears in the travelogue: Ausaka Barrier. This famous toll barrier on Mt Ausaka existed at the boundary between present-day Kyoto and Shiga Prefectures, and

⁸ The placenames below are listed as *utamakura* in Yōichi Katagiri's work, *Utamakura utakotoba jiten*.

it was regarded as the portal into and out of the capital (Kindaichi 1972, p. 36). It had been disestablished in 795; that is, it had not existed for over six hundred years by the time Shōtetsu passed through, and yet his poetic homage to it evokes a sense of immediacy and presence.

Today I trod the well-worn path over the rocks of the Ausaka Barrier.

Travellers' colts

tarry

at the rocks

of Ausaka Barrier

where my heart longs to turn back⁹

Kokoro koso

ato ni hikarure

tabibito no

koma dani nazumu

seki no iwakado

Conventionally in such poetry, Ausaka Barrier compels allusion to returning to the capital, or, as in this case, to departing from the capital, full of apprehension

⁹ This poem echoes *Shūishū* (the third imperial anthology compiled in 1005), poem 169: 'Over the rocks of the Ausaka Barrier/ I trod the well-worn path / to see in the mist / rising from the mountains / the colts of Kirihara.' Kirihara, located in present-day Nagano Prefecture, had been used for grazing since the Heian period (*Nihon kokugo daijiten*).

of what may lie ahead in the strange provinces beyond the barrier.¹⁰ It could also denote ‘crossing the barrier’ in a sexual sense. (Katagiri 1983, p. 27.)

Another set of conventions available to poets involved allusion to horses, as the Ausaka Barrier was the place where handlers took possession of horses brought to the capital from the eastern provinces (Katagiri 1983, pp. 27-28). Shōtetsu’s poem refers to both, though the colts of his poem appear to be on their way out of the capital, not arriving.

The stock associations surrounding the Ausaka barrier had accrued over the centuries through the poetry of many illustrious figures, including the blind semi-legendary poet Semimaru, and Ki no Tsurayuki, both of the early Heian period. Through composing a poem at this site, and through the imagistic selection, Shōtetsu situates himself firmly within the tradition of court poetry. Also by the power of association he posits himself as the heir to the tradition of his eminent poetic forbears, who are as closely linked to this place as the colts or the barrier. Plutschow calls this an act of ‘poetic ancestor worship’ (1982, p. 21), but it was more than that: as Donald Keene comments,

[t]he reason for traveling to the places [...] was to steep oneself in their atmosphere, savoring both what remained from the past and had changed, and then to join the long line of poets who had made these particular spots immortal. (Keene 1989, p. 220)

Plutschow also remarks that ‘perhaps, by striving to imbue themselves in the spirit of a celebrated poet, his artistic heirs sought to be graced with his gifts.’

¹⁰ As in another poem by Shōtetsu alluding to Ausaka, on the topic ‘Early spring in the mountains’: ‘Though we expect to meet the coming spring at Ausaka Pass / amazed / we behold snowy mountains / wintry as those / beyond the Shirakawa barrier.’ *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 100, and *Sōkonshū* 2380. The *Sōkonshū* headnote shows it was written on New Year’s Day 1447. *Shōtetsu monogatari* was probably completed in 1448, so the original source was in all likelihood *Sōkonshū*.

(1982, p. 57.)

This interpretation seems very plausible in the context of Shōtetsu's life and career at that time. As we have seen above, in 1418 Shōtetsu had reached a turning point in his life and his career. He was thirty-eight years old and had just retired from the security of his position of scribe at Tōfukuji, to take up the lifestyle of a wanderer or drifter (*fūryū hyōhaku*). This constituted for a monastic a 'double vow': not only to renounce the world through taking the tonsure, but also to renounce the monastic priesthood which had at this stage in Japanese history become very much part of the 'worldly realm' (Plutschow 1982, p. 39). In addition, his close mentors and teachers Ryōshun and Tamemasa had recently died. It is suggested that Shōtetsu's travels were possibly of a memorial nature, marking the first anniversary of Tamemasa's death (Plutschow 1982, p. 57). He was coping with his deep loss on one hand, but on the other he was faced with inheriting their status as leaders of the Reizei school of poetry. Thus I would propose that Shōtetsu's departure from the capital and *utamakura* itinerary are ritual, legitimising steps towards the forging of a new identity as de facto poetic leader, a process of self-authentication.

It is not surprising that on his return to the capital after his absence, Shōtetsu exerted a huge influence in the poetic milieu as the de facto Reizei heir, actively involving himself in poetry circles, holding his own monthly poetry meetings, taking on his own pupils whom he trained from boyhood (Shōkō became his pupil in 1424) and becoming very popular with poets from the warrior aristocracy (Ichiko 1990, p. 339). He associated particularly closely with the powerful Hosokawa house (Inada 1978, pp. 46-47).

In about 1421 he was granted an audience with shogun Yoshimochi, while in 1429 he presented six poems to the retired emperor Gokomatsu (1377-1433) who according to Shōtetsu was greatly impressed (*Shōtetsu Monogatari* 1: 27). The correlation between status movement and change in spatial position has been commented on by scholars such as Van Gennep in the context of initiation rituals (Turner 1974, p. 196), and Shōtetsu's journey and ensuing poetic status would appear to add weight to this theory.

To conclude, I have demonstrated in this paper two ways in which the travelogue *Nagusamegusa* exhibits the dynamics of exchange and encounter, firstly on the level of the narrator's interaction with the warriors at Kiyosu Castle, and secondly on the level of his lyrical exchange with his landscape and invocation of the literary past through *utamakura*. I have also read these exchanges in terms of their deeper signification: of the ebullient hybrid and socially mobile society emerging in the early fifteenth century, the warrior uptake of aristocratic culture, and the need by rising cultural figures for self-authentication by reference to the canons of the past, a phenomenon which was endemic in the society of this era. *Nagusamegusa* in this way reveals its 'worldly and circumstantial' essence, shared with all texts (Said 1979, p. 23).

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