

Kenji Miyazawa and his Idea of Nōmin-Geijutsu (Peasant Art)

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Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933) is one of the most popular poets and fantasy writers in modern Japan, though his present fame is in stark contrast to his obscurity while he lived. Born in 1896 in the small town of Hanamaki in Iwate Prefecture, the north-eastern part of mainland Japan (Tōhoku-chihō), he spent most of his life in his native countryside. He published only two books in his lifetime: a collection of children's tales entitled *Chūmon no Ōi Ryōri-ten* (*The Restaurant of Many Orders*), and the first section of his most famous work of poetry, *Haru to Shura* (*Spring and Ashura*). He left behind numerous fantasies and poems, including his masterpiece "Ginga Tetsudō no Yoru" (Night on the Milky Way Railway), which were published posthumously; as Donald Keene says, he died "just as his importance was at last recognized" (291). Besides literary works, his many-sided activities included those of high-school teacher, agricultural engineer, garden designer, activist of the *Nichiren* Buddhist cult, Esperantist, as well as social reformer, advocating *nōmin-geijutsu* (peasant art) to create a new kind of farming community. My paper mainly concerns the latter facet of Kenji, though we should not forget that it is closely connected with other activities.

After graduating from Morioka Kōtō Nōrin Gakkō (Morioka Agricultural and Forestry High School), Kenji became a teacher at Hanamaki Nō Gakkō (Hanamaki Agricultural School) in 1921. Taking the

job, Kenji developed close relationships with the farming community. He had a newly developed class called "The Art of Farming" through which he established friendly connections with the local farmers who came as students (all boys, for that matter). He was in charge of algebra, English, chemistry, agricultural production, agronomy, soil fertility and meteorology. He was also given an experimental paddy for rice cultivation.

Though teaching at the school agreed happily with Kenji, he left the position in 1926 to establish *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* (the Rasu Farmers Association). He declared then his intention of becoming a peasant himself, which was regarded by his parents and local inhabitants as one of his eccentricities, as Kenji was the eldest son of the wealthiest family in the town and nothing was more likely than his becoming a peasant. His activities proved, however, that he was in earnest. At the detached house of his family on the riverside of Shimoneko-zakura, where he was staying at the time, Kenji gathered together a group of young people from farming families in the community and lectured to them on agronomy and other subjects. The association also engaged in plays, music, and other cultural activities. Nearby were the fields Kenji cultivated and worked at during this period of his life.

It was probably shortly before he began his new life that Kenji wrote the final draft of "Nōmin Geijutsu Gairon Kōyō" (An Outline Survey of Peasant Art), in which he envisioned peasant art as it might be in the future, contrasting his ideal with the present state of general unhappiness for ordinary peasants. It was, as Mallory Fromm explains, "a statement of his mature inner vision written in a sort of shorthand that reflects the urgency and excitement of the labours he was shortly to commence" (96). Hence the general obscurities of the text.

As the word "Rasu" of *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* is such an unfamiliar term for Japanese that a number of explanations have been proposed. Perhaps it came from English "rustic," or just the reverse of "(a)sura" (a

demon god). One of the tenable etymologies is that it might be derived from the name "Ruskin," as a critic Itsuo Onda first suggested (Onda 1961, 2727-2734). Although Kenji does not actually mention Ruskin in the text, Katsumi Ito, Kenji's pupil and a member of the association, recalled later that Kenji talked about Ruskin in the class (Kawabata 33). It seems plausible as we can find definite connections between Kenji and Ruskin through William Morris, whose name Kenji does mention several times in his "memo" for "A Revival of Peasant Art."

As a matter of fact, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Ruskin and Morris were, along with Tolstoy, Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter, highly valued by Japanese intellectuals as the most significant Western thinkers in the modern era. During the first quarter of the century alone, over twenty titles by Ruskin were translated into Japanese, including *Modern Painters*, *Sesame and Lilies*, *Unto This Last*, to mention but a few (See Watanabe 304ff.). As for Morris, the first Japanese version of *News from Nowhere*, entitled *Risō-kyō* (An Ideal Place), was published in abridged form in 1904 by *Heiminsha*, the Society of Commoners (translated by Toshihiko Sakai, a pioneering Japanese socialist), which was followed by Morris's principal lectures on art and society: "Decorative (Lesser) Art," "The Art of the People," "The Beauty of Life," "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toils," "Art, Wealth, and Riches," "Art and Socialism," and so on. It is not too much to say that Japanese versions of Ruskin and Morris flooded in during this period.

In "The Revival of Peasant Art," Kenji wrote:

Our ancestors, though poor, lived quite happily.

They possessed both Art and religion.

Today we have only work and existence.

Religion, now enervated, has been replaced by modern science,
yet science is cold and dark.

Art has departed our midst and become wretchedly decadent.

Those we now call people of religion and Art monopolize and sell
Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

We lack both the strength and the necessity to purchase.

We must now walk a true, new path and create our own Beauty!
Burn away gray labour with Art!⁽¹⁾

In the first two lines, we can detect a kind of medievalism in Kenji's mind. Kenji added some comments to the last line in his memo: "The revival of Art must be the revival of joy in labour. / Morris 'Art is man's expression of his joy in Labour'"⁽²⁾. Morris was probably first brought to Kenji's attention by Takanobu Murobuse, who referred to him several times in *Bunmei no Botsuraku* (Decline of Civilization, 1923). However, reading Kenji's summary of Morris's concept of an ideal community where art is revived, there is no doubt that he read *News from Nowhere* as well as some of his lectures.

It should be noted here that there is a certain difference in nuances between the English word "art" and the Japanese term "geijutsu," though they are generally considered to be equivalent words, the latter being a translated word (*hon'yaku-go*) like "minshu-shugi" (democracy), "bunka" (culture), "jiyū" (freedom), "ren'ai" (love), "bi" (beauty), "kare" (he) or "kanojo" (she) (Yanabu 1982). A Japanese encyclopedia defines "geijutsu" as "a general term given to one of the distinctive human activities that create original value" (*Heibonsha Dai-hyakka*). When we hear the word "geijutsu," we usually associate peculiar forms of "art" apart from our ordinary life. From the start, the word "geijutsu" has gained a rather exclusive, high-class quality: "the Art" or "the fine arts" in its most modern sense of the word, denoting special skill or works of painting, engraving, or sculpture. It is due to some particular ideology of the intellectuals in the early Meiji era (in the late nineteenth century) who tried to introduce the concept of "art" in such a sense into Japan, discarding instead older, more general senses. In short, "gei-

jutsu” was conceived as something remote from our daily life. No one in pre-modern Japan would have used the word in such a particular connotation.

On the other hand, as we have just seen, “art” had become an increasingly alien word for working class people in Britain and America after the Industrial Revolution. Ruskin and Morris are significant in criticizing the situation in which “art” was monopolized by the well-to-do. When Morris insisted on the importance of “lesser arts” or “decorative arts,” he tried to stop the monopoly. He declares in his lecture “The Lesser Arts”: “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few” (*Works*, xxii, 26). In the same lecture, Morris points out that the love of luxury and show has ruined the arts since the Renaissance. Therefore, he says, we must return to the traditional yeoman’s house and the humble village church for the best of English decorative art, which is “never coarse, though often rude enough, sweet, natural, and unaffected, an art of peasants rather than of merchant princes of courtiers.” He goes on to say:

A peasant art, I say, and it clung fast to the life of the people, and still lived among the cottagers and yeomen in many parts of the country while the big houses were being “French and fine”: still lived also in many a quaint pattern of loom and printing-block, and embroiderer’s needle, while overseas stupid pomp had extinguished all nature and freedom, and art was become...the mere expression of that successful and exultant rascality which in the flesh no long time afterwards went down into the pit for ever.
(18)

It is just this emphasis on peasant crafts that determined the whole direction of the later Arts and Crafts movement. It was a call for a return to functional simplicity in “the arts of life,” and Morris certainly

believed that this would follow from substituting production for use for production for profit (Henderson 200). In another lecture on “Art and Labour” (1894), he proposes to take the word “art” in a more wider sense: “by art, I do not mean only pictures and sculpture, nor only these and architecture, that is beautiful buildings properly ornamented; these are only a portion of art, which comprises, as I understand the word a great deal more; beauty produced by the labour of man both mental and bodily, the expression for the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings, in other words the human pleasure of life is what I mean by art” (*Unpublished Lectures*, 94–95.)

In Kenji’s project for Rasu Chijin Kyōkai, we can discern the definite influences of Ruskin and Morris. There are similarities between Kenji and the people engaged in the Arts and Crafts movement. Neither Kenji did want art for a few. “What does the word ‘artist’ mean to us?” Kenji asks in “Creators of Peasant Art,” a section of “An Outline of Peasant Art”:

Professional artists will one day cease to exist.
Let everyone adopt an artist-like sensibility.
Ceaselessly express yourself along the lines of your individual
genius.
We are, each of us, artists at one time or another.”⁽³⁾

Indeed, he found frequently the occasions when the ordinary life could be transformed into art, as seen in his poem entitled “Dai San Geijutsu (the third art)”:

When I was furrowing the field
I found a little man with gray hair
standing behind me.
“What d’you intend to sow?” he asked me.

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"I'll sow seeds of red turnip," answered I.
"Never furrow like that, then," he said,
and he showed me the way himself,
taking my hoe
and furrowing the plot obliquely.
I stood still, moved,
entirely enchanted.
The sun shone and the wind blew,
the shadows of the two on the sand,
the river glittering over there.
I was almost in ecstasy, thinking,
"What kind of Indian-ink drawings
or flavour of a sculptor's chisel
could surpass this?"⁽⁴⁾

The sole qualification for membership of Rasu Chijin Kyōkai was a connection, even if only tenuous, with farming or "soil" (hence the word "chijin" or "men of the earth"). There were no fees or dues. Everything needed by the organization was supplied by Kenji. About twenty young men joined. The majority were ex-pupils of Kenji from Hanamaki High School of Agriculture, and students who had attended his lecture series at Iwate National High School. A few members were from Morioka, the biggest city in the area (Fromm 185). The association's activities were at first few, but gradually they increased. A small "orchestra" of six or seven youths was formed by Kenji, who sold some of his books to purchase the instruments. Kenji held record concerts and story readings at the association of Saturday afternoons and evenings for whoever came, usually the local children.

Though its activities were short-lived—only for two years—as his physical condition declined during the period and he died of a lung disease in 1933 at the age of 37, his experiments of Nōmin-geijutsu as

well as his theory expressed in “The Outline” were both unique and valuable.

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the symposium of “The Arts and Crafts Movement and Japan” in the 3rd International Forum for the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Social Settlement Movement, held at Kantō Gakuin University, Yokohama, July 26, 2003

(Received September 30, 2003)

Notes

- (1) 「曾つてわれらの師父たちは乏しいながら可成楽しく生きてゐた／そこには芸術も宗教もあった／いまわれらにはただ労働が 生存があるばかりである／宗教は疲れて近代科学に置換され然も科学は冷たく暗い／芸術はいまわれらを離れ然もわびしく墮落した／いま宗教家芸術家とは真善若くは美を独占し販るものである／われらに購ふべき力もなく 又さるものを必要とせぬ／いまわれらは新たに正しき道を行き われらの美をば創らねばならぬ／芸術をもてあの灰色の労働を燃せ」(*Shin Kōhon*, xiii, text, 10.) I used Mallory's translation for the English text of “Nōmin Geijutsu Gairon Kōyō.”
- (2) 「芸術の回復は労働に於ける悦びの回復でなければならぬ Morris “Art is man's expression of his joy in labour.”」(*Shin Kōhon*, xiii, text, 19.)
- (3) 「……われらのなかで芸術家とはどういふことを意味するか……／職業芸術家は一度亡びねばならぬ／誰人もみな芸術家たる感受をなせ／個性の優れる方面に於て各々止むなき表現をなせ／然もめいめいそのときどきの芸術家である」(*Shin Kōhon*, xiii, text, 14.)
- (4) 「蕪のうねをこさへてゐたら／白髪あたまの小さな人が／いつかうしろに立ってゐた／それから何を播くかときいた／赤蕪をまくつもりだと答へた／赤蕪のうね かう立てると／その人はしづかに手を出して／こっちの鋤をとりかへし／畦をひとこ斜めに掻いた／おれは頭がしいんと鳴って／魔薬をかけてしまはれたやう／ぼんやりとしてつ立った／日が照り風も吹いてゐて／二人の影は砂に落ち／川も向ふで光ってゐたが／わたしはまるで恍惚として／どんな水墨の筆触／どういふ彫塑家の鑿のかをりが／これに対して勝るであらうと考へた」(*Shin Kōhon*, v, text, 30-31.)

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