

Between the Floating Mist *Poems of Ryōkan*

TRANSLATED BY DENNIS MALONEY AND HIDE OSHIRO

BUFFALO, NY: WHITE PINE PRESS, 2009

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Lotus Moon *The Poetry of Rengetsu*

TRANSLATED BY JOHN STEVENS

BUFFALO, NY: WHITE PINE PRESS, 2005

130 PAGES, ISBN 978-1893996366, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Charlotte Eubanks

In addition to its importance as a major world religion, Buddhism has produced one of the longest-running, most multifaceted, and brilliantly textured literary cultures, spanning nearly two millennia and covering the full range of the Asian continent. Over the last three centuries or so, Buddhist literature has also exerted increasing influence on authors in the West. Henry David Thoreau owned a copy of Robert Spence Hardy's *A Manual of Buddhism* [sic]. Gary Snyder, Alan Ginsberg, and Jane Hirshfield have each penned a poetic sutra. Jack Kerouac wrote a biography of the Buddha, and a host of recent books hail the emergence of a distinctly American Buddhist literature in the twentieth century. Closer to home, YouTube is an easy way to access the astounding world of Buddhist hip-hop lyricism. All of which is to say that these delicate, delightful poems of nineteenth-century Japanese hermits are not nearly as distant from the minds of our students as it may seem at first blush. Indeed, *Lotus Moon* and *Between the Floating Mist*, both part of White Pine Press's *Companions for the Journey* Series, should prove remarkably accessible to students at the middle school level and above, and each of the slender volumes could easily be adapted for teaching.

Between the Floating Mist brings together a wide range of poetry by the Zen monk Ryōkan (1758–1831), along with a brief but serviceable introduction. Born the son of a village headman in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture), Ryōkan left home at seventeen to become a monk. After some fifteen years of monastic living, he embarked on a five-year period of homeless wandering before settling down in a one-room hut on the slopes of Mt. Kugami, overlooking the valley in which he was born. He spent the rest of his life living in the mountains, begging in nearby villages, playing with local children, chopping firewood, and composing poetry. He writes,

*I'm truly simple
living among trees and grasses.
Don't ask me about illusion or enlightenment.
I'm just an old man who smiles to himself.
I ford streams with these thin legs,
and carry my bag in fine weather.
Such is my life,
but the world owes me nothing.* (21)

The able translations by Dennis Maloney and Hide Oshiro include a selection of Ryōkan's *kanshi* (Chinese language poems); some of his *tanka* (Japanese poetry); and a representative collection of Ryōkan's poetic correspondence with the nun Teishin, who was twenty years his junior and whose epistolary companionship provided a bright spot in his later years of illness and decline. My only critique of this volume is that the introduc-

tory material is rather thin, a shortcoming that can be easily remedied by referring to the essays by Peter Haskel and Ryūichi Abe in *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryōkan*.¹

Rengetsu (1791–1875) was a near-contemporary of Ryōkan, but though her poetry stems from and responds to the same larger tradition, the details of her life could not have been more different. She was born in the pleasure quarters outside the old imperial capital at Kyoto. The illegitimate daughter of a young geisha and a high-ranking samurai, Rengetsu was adopted by a lay priest at the Pure Land temple of Chionji and given a classical warrior's education, learning martial arts, poetic composition, and calligraphy. As translator John Stevens writes, "Rengetsu was just as capable of disarming intruders and subduing annoying drunks as she was at making poetry and performing the tea ceremony" (10). Her hold on respectability, however, remained tenuous. Married at seventeen to an abusive husband, she lost three children before the marriage dissolved. She married again, happily, but lost both her husband and their two children to illness. She retreated to Chionji but held no official position there and, bereft of a benefactor, was forced to leave and live on her wits. She responded with awe-inspiring alacrity, teaching herself the art of pottery and taking up a peripatetic lifestyle, digging her clay in the mountains outside the capital; firing her pottery in borrowed kilns; then traveling into the city to sell her wares, many examples of which she inscribed with her own verse.

There are any number of places where Ryōkan's and Rengetsu's writing could fit very nicely into curricula on world literature, creative writing, religion, or history.

In this slender volume, translator John Stevens brings us a broad collection of Rengetsu's poetry, along with a wonderfully succinct introduction to Rengetsu's life and times and photographs of her pottery and calligraphy. An afterword by Bonnie Myotai Treace, former abbess of the Zen Center of New York City, provides several lovely readings of the poems, as understood from the point of view of a contemporary American Buddhist practitioner. Treace writes,

One pleasure of discovering the lives and teachings of the rare women we find in the history of Buddhism is seeing how they take up the tragedies in their lives and transform them. They remind us of the freedom that no circumstance can take from us . . . [F]inding someone like Rengetsu is a great gift. (120)

There are any number of places where Ryōkan's and Rengetsu's writing could fit very nicely into curricula on world literature, creative writing, religion, or history. Any world poetry class that includes a mention of Bashō's *haiku*, for example, will find instructive riffs on similar themes, as both Ryōkan and Rengetsu respond explicitly to Bashō's famous "Old Pond" poem. Ryōkan: "The new pond,/ a frog jumps in/ — no sound!" (87); Rengetsu: "As I reach to gather/ some fallen blossoms/ a frog leaps into the stream/ and then floats about/ the water in protest" (36). Further, Ryōkan's selections provide ideal material for discussing differences between *tanka*, *haiku* (Japanese-language), and *kanshi* (Chinese-language) poetic sensibilities, a conversation that could be grounded in a reading of the two English-translated prefaces (one written in Chinese, one in Japanese) to the tenth-century imperial poetry anthology *Kokinshū*.² A creative writing assignment might then ask students to "translate" one of Ryōkan's poems stylistically from *tanka* into *kanshi*, or vice versa.

The poetry would also make a wonderful addition to surveys of world religion. There is more than enough material in the introductions and in the poems themselves to support an imaginative building activity, such as constructing a facsimile of Ryōkan's hut or mapping the mountain and

towns in which he spent so much time. And, here, some comparison of this hut to Thoreau's cabin at Walden or Kerouac's and Snyder's fire look-outs could be very instructive.

Finally, Japanese, East Asian, or world history instructors will find much delight in these two poets. Rengetsu's life, in particular, provides a rare and exciting connection between the world of the pleasure quarters, samurai culture, Buddhist monasticism, and the arts of the old imperial capital at Kyoto. As a bonus, her poems even refer to the arrival of Commodore Perry and the lead-up to the Meiji Restoration. A teaser in closing: Open to page 106 to find out what a samurai-trained nun has to say about the pre-Meiji Restoration fighting that broke out in 1860s Japan. Intrigued? You should be. ■

NOTES

1. Peter Haskel and Ryūichi Abe, *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryōkan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).
2. Laurel Rasplica Rodd, *A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2004).

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Lost Colony

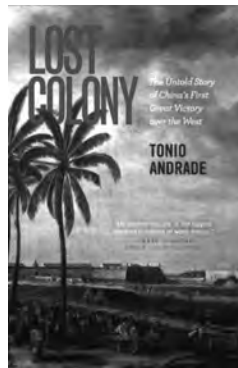
The Untold Story of China's First Great Victory over the West

BY TONIO ANDRADE

PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

456 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0691144559, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Robert Hoppens



In *Lost Colony*, Tonio Andrade offers a highly readable account of the Sino-Dutch War of 1661–62 that resulted in the loss of the Dutch colony on Taiwan, which will be of great use for educators, their students, and general readers. Andrade treats the war as a case study to test competing explanations for the “rise of the West” to dominance in Asia, one of the largest and most controversial questions in world history literature. Andrade lays out the contending positions on this question between “revisionists,” who argue that the difference in technological, political, economic, and social development between the West and Asians was minimal before the Industrial Revolution; and the traditional explanation and its “counter-revisionist” defenders who hold that the rise of the West is attributable to the long historical development of unique and superior aspects of Western civilization. Andrade also tests a more specific explanation, the “military revolution theory” which holds that Westerners, even if not bearers of a superior civilization, enjoyed an advantage in military technology, organization, and discipline over other peoples.

Andrade, who is explicit about beginning in the revisionist camp, arrives at a compromise position. The Dutch in the seventeenth century did indeed enjoy superiority in certain military technologies, specifically in ship construction and in the construction of fortifications (what Andrade calls the “renaissance fortress”). These advantages, however, turned out to be marginal. In other areas, such as artillery, military organization, strategy, tactics, and discipline, Chinese forces were the equal of Dutch forces. Even in those areas that the Dutch enjoyed a technological advantage, the gap was not so great that these advantages could not be neutralized through adoption or strategic adaptation. Thus, Andrade's account reveals neither an insurmountable Western technological or cultural superiority nor a kind of equality that omits historical distinctiveness but rather small differences that become more pronounced over time.

The counter-revisionists are correct that the Dutch had a technological advantage over the Chinese in warfare, but the revisionists are right that it was a slight one, easily made up . . . Perhaps we have not a sudden Great Divergence occurring around 1800 but rather a small and accelerating divergence beginning in the sixteenth century. (15)

This position is unlikely to satisfy partisans of either camp but is encouraging to those of us who, with Andrade, find ourselves in class “walking a tightrope” between Eurocentrism and “Europhobia” (to borrow from David Landes) (17). As one case study, Andrade's work won't settle the problem of how to account for the rise of the West, but perhaps it will

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