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The 1918 Shikoku Pilgrimage of Takamure Itsue

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A Review of *The 1918 Shikoku Pilgrimage of Takamure Itsue*

Ronald S. Green¹

The 1918 Shikoku Pilgrimage of Takamure Itsue, an English translation of Musume Junreiki by Takamure Itsue. Translated by Susan Tennant. Bowen Island, BC: Bowen Publishing, 2010, 274 pages, ISBN 978-1-45-054075-9 (paper), \$16.95.

This book is a collection of 105 short reflections and poems by Takamure Itsue (1894–1964) on her travels to and around Shikoku in 1918, when she was twenty-three years old. Each piece was published individually during her pilgrimage as a serial column in a Kyushu newspaper. They were compiled after her death and published as *Musume Junreiki* (1979). Although best known as a historian and feminist concerned with the education of women, she also wrote *Gohenro* (1938) and *Henro to jinsei* (1939), two additional books about her 1918 Shikoku pilgrimage.

Shikoku is the smallest of the four main islands of the Japanese archipelago. According to legend, the pilgrimage was established by Kōbō Daishi (the posthumous name of Kūkai, 774–835), founder of the Shingon tradition of Japanese esoteric Buddhism, although it gained popularity only much later. Pilgrims ideally visit eighty-eight officially designated temple sites and usually a number of unofficial sites that honor of the life of Kōbō Daishi. The route winds along most of the perimeter of Shikoku, some 870 miles. Today, most pilgrims travel by bus, although roughly one thousand people still walk the sometimes

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difficult trails each year. It is usually undertaken in a clockwise direction around the island, like the circumambulation of stupas. However, Takamure and her traveling companion, a seventy-three year old man named Itō, chose to hike it counter-clockwise, which makes the mountain treks more arduous, the signs more difficult or impossible to follow and thereby the merit greater. Pilgrims hope that the merit accrued by their hardships and by the grace of Kōbō Daishi might be applied to such concerns as healing illnesses—their own or those of family members—or gaining a favorable rebirth for loved ones recently deceased. Pilgrims typically keep such wishes secret, and guessing Takamure's motives becomes a reoccurring habit and source for undeserved sympathy from those she meets along the route.

There are many admirable elements of Takamure's writing. Hers is a kind of ethnography, a subjective and selective account of an individual of a particular time and cultural circumstance encountering the people and places associated with the pilgrimage as she found it in 1918. It is neither an academic treatment of the pilgrimage, as can be found in Ian Reader's *Making Pilgrimages, Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), nor a guidebook, such as Miyata Taisen's *A Henro Pilgrimage Guide to the 88 Temples of Shikoku Island, Japan* (Los Angeles: Kōyasan, 2006). Referring to those studies however, can be useful in evaluating some of the ways the pilgrimage has changed over the last century. For example, Takamure mentions a large number of pilgrims with leprosy and other diseases, pilgrims being interrogated by the police and arrested for begging, the lack of lodging and other features that contrast with the touristic aspects of today's pilgrimage.

The 1918 Shikoku Pilgrimage can be seen as a literary and poetic travel diary, in some ways like Hayashi Fumiko's *Diary of a Vagabond* that appeared in 1927, nine years after Takamure's trip. Through Takamure's words we get a glimpse of a particular aspect of Japanese Buddhism as it begins to encounter modernity. Readers may find it odd that there is no mention of historical events considered major at the time, such as the

rice riots and Japanese military intervention in Siberia. On the other hand, by using the medium of her personal interactions with tradition, Takamura presents us with ethical reflections we may find topical and instructive today.

From the beginning, she admits she does not know why she wants to undertake such a difficult trip. She has no faith in Kōbō Daishi or illnesses to heal. This ambivalence or seeming lack of ordinary motive serves at least three unacknowledged literary functions. It establishes her as pure in the sense of not seeking selfish gains. It paints her as truly drifting and thereby open to experience without expectation or concern even for what is around the next corner. Importantly, it connects hers with the other great poetic travel diaries of Japan such as Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Nikki* (c. 935). We cannot help but notice the affinity with Matsuō Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Deep Interior* (late seventeenth century), which also starts with the observation that he can think of no motivation but seems to be compelled simply by the spirit of travel. Like Bashō, Takamura includes numerous original poems in classical style. Again like Bashō, this connects her with the deep history of Japanese culture, as does the pilgrimage, and provides a means of establishing who she is as a modern individual within the matrix of Japanese history. Instead to referencing Saigyō as Bashō had done, Takamura builds a different kind of persona but in the same way, saying her journey makes her like Edgar Allen Poe. Remarkably, she constructs this evolving personality in serialized newspaper form. In contrast, although Bashō's entries often appear as spontaneous and the result of accident, they are actually produced through long labor that connects each stop along his route with the intricacy governing linked verses of *renga* poetry. Since Takamura did not have such a grand overall compositional scheme, as far as we know, it is noteworthy that a striking sculpture appears as her story proceeds. This contributes to the reader's image that she is truly progressing according to the stages of development one might expect along the pilgrimage, beginning with the awakening of faith in what she

is doing and eventually resulting in undertaking compassionate acts for all beings.

Takamure is most inclined toward rational explanations of such changes in behavior, seeing compassion as existing as a potential in all beings and the hardships of travel an activating element. Others insist Kōbō Daishi appears in the flesh to aid pilgrims in need and thereby changes their attitudes. A major theme in the writings is the contrast of her modernist views with traditional outlooks. Her traveling companion, Itō, who has vowed to help her along the journey, insists the world is flat. To Takamure's frustration, he argues that if it were round we would all fall off. There seems to be three sources for the ideas she finds questionable or wrong. The first is superstition, such as that connected with the appearance of Kōbō Daishi. Although she is clearly skeptical of such descriptions, she never explicitly states she believes they are wrong. As time goes on, one feels she develops a view that such opinions are relative to one's historical perspective. She is less sympathetic to other sources of misinformation, the second most prevalent type appearing in the form of arrogant pontification. A number of times priests and others incorrectly explain some aspects of Buddhism or the pilgrimage. In explaining the power of the Kōmyō Shingon, the Mantra of Light, one priest says, when chanted, gods will come down from heaven. He then misreads one of the Chinese graphs. While Itō weeps at this explanation, Takamure can only sit dumbfounded. Although she is put off by this interpretation, sometime later she chants the Kōmyō Shingon a thousand times, indicating that she finds something of value in it, although it is unclear exactly what that is. Here, as in other cases throughout the translation, Susan Tennant provides a succinct description and explanation of the mantra. The translator undoubtedly devoted much time to the manuscript and utilizes expert informants in her appreciable footnotes. The third source of misinformation Takamure encounters seems to be those offered with malicious intent, for example in attempts to attract her to a man's feigned wisdom and charms. In one such case, a man dressed in western clothes approaches her. In contrast,

Takamura is wearing a *yukata*, traditional Japanese summer wear. The man tries to impress her by saying he has just returned from abroad and found the Yellow Sea was a moving mass of yellow colored water in the Pacific Ocean. In all cases, such confounded views are imposed on her, resulting in her quiet discomfort and sometimes abhorrence. There can be little doubt that Takamura is consciously using such encounters to construct a commentary on the broader conflicts taking place in society between tradition and modernity. This can be taken as the central point that emerges from the writings, that one should not simply swallow promises of the future or nostalgia for the past without digesting both so that an informed person may emerge. Likewise, there may be value in both, even while seeming incongruous. These points remain equally important and are as often ignored today.

Takamura's identification with the bodhisattva Kannon, a Japanese version of Avalokiteśvara, becomes a reoccurring motif throughout, and potentially provides a potent conclusion. Originally she had planned to go on a different pilgrimage in honor of the Kannon, but had decided on Shikoku purely by chance. These descriptions further highlight the clashes between old and new by way of explanations of her life and because of her ambivalence about which to embrace. Takamura tells us her mother had several children before she was born, but all had died. In desperation, her mother appealed to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion and, in East Asia, the patron saint of women and easy childbirth. Growing up, Takamura was told she was a miracle child, born on Kannon's day of the month, the eighteenth, as a servant or even an emanation of the bodhisattva. Throughout the pilgrimage, Takamura speculates, typically through insinuation, about a remote plausibility of this, even if it is to be only by virtue of accepting the responsibility of the designation. This is, again, our situation in choosing how to deal with history and cultural expectations, with profound implications for Buddhist ethics. Takamura explores various methods of dealing with others' insistence on her powers to bestow healing grace upon them. She denies such abilities, but occasionally when this is met with further

imploring, she consoles ailing people by pretending to *accede* to their requests. At such times, she is sure to make fun of herself for those reading the accounts published in the newspaper, calling herself the god of boils and the god of colds in self-deprecation. Ironically, some who read the articles became convinced she had these powers. Throughout, we share her confusion about her potential in this. Even among those who do not know about her possible connection with the bodhisattva, many people see something oddly different about her. Perhaps this is an indication that she represents modernity, at least in part, and difference itself.

In many of her reflections, Takamure expresses strong repugnance for the superstitious, lying and selfish people she meets. Rather shockingly, she describes pilgrims as demons with twisted mouths and even longs to be separated from Itō. But, as time goes by, readers might detect a change developing in the literary figure of Takamure. Her disparaging descriptions of Itō are replaced by reference to him with the honorific appendage “*sama*,” as pointed out in a footnote, and by calling him a virtuous old man. At another point late in the journey, she typically mentions how rude a woman had been, only to realize afterwards that she had misjudged the woman. Similarly, she had commented earlier that people were rude in laughing at her, who was always serious. As her trip nears the end we come to see there is self-deprecating humor in some of her misplaced harshness toward others and perhaps a joke in calling herself always serious. For example, when misjudging the woman she exclaims, “How rude!” just as she had done previously about others. However, in the same entry she admits her mistake. It is difficult to decide where the tongue-in-cheek irony begins and whether it was there all along. We also notice that circumstances have either forced her or prompted her to adopt misrepresentations of herself similar to those that had so disgusted her in others. Perhaps she comes to understand there may be unseen reasons for such behavior, some driven by compassion. This again conveys empathy for diverse

views and a general feeling that we can never be sure about our opinions.

In the end, Takamura vows to develop and actualize universal compassion. Those she has previously despised on the pilgrimage may be of particular value in attaining this. Again, we are unsure whether she realizes that her vow perfectly fulfills the expectation that she is an emanation of Kannon and are left to wonder if it is necessary or even important to realize this in order to fulfill it. Shikoku pilgrims today feel we all have the potential for universal compassion, sometimes called the living spirit of Kōbō Daishi. As readers, we are inclined to believe Takamura's realization of this spirit is sincere, in part because it appears in serialized form without an expectation that was set up from the beginning. She has also built our trust by reporting her joyous, sorrowful and angry moments regardless of how embarrassing, sometimes conveying these in ways that play on conventions of Japanese literature, for example, suggesting her sleeves are wet with tears. She has also appeared forthcoming about her prejudices and has reproached herself accordingly. Finally, and perhaps most convincingly, we believe in the sincerity of her transformation because we are unsure if she realizes the change in herself. We have come to this conclusion without being told it is so. As with other literary devices she has used, the reader's uncertainty, mirroring Takamura's, is a powerful element of persuasion. From our perspective, and maybe hers, the change that takes place in several stages as the journey progresses can be seen as subtext to the narrative and its apt conclusion.