ASAKUSA KANNON
RYŌGOKU BRIDGE

Terakado Seiken, two segments from *Edo hanjōki*

(1832-36)

Introduced and Translated by

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printed in an edition of 1,000 copies
by Aksornsamai Press
Bangkok, Thailand

9121 Sunset Boulevard
Hollywood, California 90069, U.S.A.
tel. 310-276-9522
fax. 310-276-0242

an episodic festschrift for Howard Hibbett

Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
of which this is
the first volume

INTRODUCTION

Terakado Seiken (1796-1868) was born in Edo, the son of a secondary wife or mistress of an auditor for the accounts of the Mito domain in the city. Orphaned while an adolescent, young Seiken suffered from poverty and indifferent treatment at the hands of the several relatives entrusted with his care. An early period of recklessness, even incipient delinquency preceded a sober devotion

to the Confucian classics and to the canon of Chinese literature. By his late twenties, Seiken felt confident to open his own *juku*, or private academy in Edo; instruction in the basic Confucian curriculum remained his primary livelihood throughout his long life.

A bid around 1830 to enter the administration of his native Mito domain, newly revitalized by the accession of the dynamic *daimyō* Tokugawa Nariaki (1800-1860), proved utterly futile. Discouraged, frustrated—and perhaps eager to ease his precarious finances—Seiken undertook the composition of his first and most famous work, *Edo hanjōki*, in the summer of 1831. The wildfire success of the title, far in excess of the author's expectations, proved to be a mixed blessing, for fame invariably invited scrutiny and official notice. A preliminary ban on the caustic work, issued by the Shōheikō or shogunal academy in 1835, did not deter the author from continuing his endeavors: Seiken, undaunted, issued even more pointed attacks on administrative ineptitude. Finally in 1842, at the height of

the puritanical Tenpō Reforms, the full force of *bakufu* displeasure came to bear on Terakado Seiken: the author was sentenced to *hōkō-kamai*, a prohibition on assuming any form of service, and a virtual dishonorable discharge from samurai status.

During the remaining twenty-five years of his life, Seiken, now *persona non grata*, forsook Edo and wandered extensively along the trunk highways of central Honshu. In villages and post stations, he offered his services as a schoolmaster, calligrapher, and literary "jobber," an author on demand for a considerable rural "vanity industry" of elegant stele inscriptions, memorial essays, and unctuous prefaces to private albums of Chinese poetry. Far from the turmoil that wracked Mito and the battles that scarred his beloved Edo, Seiken lived out his final years uneventfully in a sleepy market town on the Tone River. Fittingly, perhaps, his death in April 1868 almost coincides with the demise of "Edo" itself—reborn as "Tōkyō" and the hub of a radical new order in September of that same year.

Edo hanjōki (An account of the prosperity of Edo), the single work among his many by which Seiken is known today, may best be described as a satirical or whimsical gazetteer of the primary sights and characteristic scenes of Edo in the early nineteenth century. Each of the some sixty segments constituting the work centers around a single node of urban vitality. Seiken's interest lies not so much in the burgeoning commercial prosperity of the metropolis, but rather, in the elaborate leisure culture, superfluous activity, and ostentatious consumption that distinguish Edo from any other urban center.

Aside from one *waka* poem, the text is exclusively in literary Chinese, of constantly variable purity and ornamentation. Forbidding as such a medium might seem to us, it struck a responsive chord with contemporary readers, who delighted in viewing the most secular and plebeian aspects of their society translated into this most elevated form of expression. In accordance with the spirit of *kyōshi*, or "mad Chinese poetry," then in high vogue, Seiken frequently provides

macaronic Chinese equivalents for native proverbs, songs, or catch phrases, and even translates brief excerpts of kabuki plays and vernacular *gesaku* literature. Needless to say, quotations from Chinese classics, often wryly distorted or inappropriately applied, are another staple in the author's comic arsenal.

In composing *Edo hanjōki*, Seiken doubtless found inspiration in a number of antecedents, chief among them the vernacular *meisho zue* "albums of famous places," popular guidebooks to famous sites of major cities and highways; and collections of Chinese *chikushi* ("bamboo branch") quatrains devoted to the sights and sensations of specifically Japanese urban settings. In its length and variety, its odd blend of delicacy and crudity, its tart satire and sweet nostalgia, *Edo hanjōki* was in a genre of its own devising. The success of the first installment, privately printed in 1832, led Seiken to compose at least four more chapters through 1836, and inspired a distinctive lineage of derivative works through the mid-1880s.

The two passages translated here, both from the initial installment, demonstrate a number of the primary features of *Edo hanjōki*. Central to each segment is the *sakariba*, or "bustling place" that is the focus of description. These crowded sites to Seiken are concentrations of the admirable and the less endearing aspects of humanity, and display to best advantage the electricity, extravagance, and endearing chaos unique to Edo. Occasionally, Seiken introduces dialogue into the segments, or builds up rudimentary characterizations. More commonly, however, as in these segments, the pleasure-loving inhabitants of Edo remain an anonymous undifferentiated mass, accessories to the scene. The populations of the *sakariba* appear as tiny animated figures against elaborate backdrops—puppets, one might say, in some *nozoki-karakuri* peep show cabinet, while Seiken assumes the role of exhibitor or showman, constantly amplifying by grandiose description the crowded miniature before us.

The commotion and random hubbub of Edo, its heterogeneity, fascinate the author. Against

a familiar framework, the sights and sounds of the city vary constantly, like gaudy patterns in a kaleidoscope. As if in imitation of this protean scene, Seiken's prose itself fluctuates constantly between calm objective description, harangue, and painful, intimate self-revelation, never content with any one tone. Lyrical, evocative passages alternate with rough and scabrous humor. Gross caricature and subtle irony find equal space on the author's palette. Unable to stay fixed on any single point of the scene, *Edo hanjōki* darts constantly from one vignette to the next, creating a montage more often than a cohesive panorama.

The heterogeneity of the city admits the frequent juxtaposition of polar extremes. To Seiken, though, these oppositions are not discordant: they may in fact be complementary, or qualify as symbiotic. The ageless solemnity of Asakusa and the tawdry trinket-laden souvenir stalls, at first glance wildly disparate, are strongly interrelated; the stifling heat of midsummer brings a heightened consciousness of coolness to the pleasure boaters. Blinding light and profound

darkness mark the skies near Ryōgoku; opulence and poverty stand literally shoulder to shoulder along the bridge. Perhaps as a result of his dedication to the ancient *Book of Changes*, Seiken recognizes the mutually generating, cyclical quality of opposites. Just when the merriment of the boaters reaches its peak, a sudden silence covers the waters; when the confidence of Edo soars highest, already the seeds of decline and undoing are present. Throughout Seiken's evocation of a society at its most flamboyant and exuberant lurks an undercurrent of melancholy, a conviction that all movement from a zenith can only be decline.

The chief stylistic attraction of *Edo hanjōki*—the animating feature as well of *kyōshi* and *kyōka* "mad" versions of orthodox Chinese and classical Japanese poetry—is the extreme disjuncture it presents between form and content, the use of language and formats sanctioned for the most refined expression with utterly inappropriate secular or pedestrian topics. The crucial impact of this sort of hyperbolic style is, of course, blunted or

annihilated in a conventional translation; a translation faithful to the tone of the original, though possible, would tax the patience of even the most sympathetic reader. In its use of this disjuncture—a source of humor certainly frayed if not threadbare after a century of intensive exploitation—*Edo hanjōki* at the same time introduces an innovation not neutralized by translation: an attempt to stress not contrast, but resonance between the "vulgar" and "refined," the modern and antique, and to cull elegance from what is commonplace. The raucous flotilla on the Sumida evokes classical realms, the poet Su Shi's haunting excursions to Red Cliff in 1082; Su Shi's private picnic in a frail bark resonates sympathetically with a past as remote to him as Su Shi is to Seiken, the grand doomed armada of Cao Cao in 208, seemingly invincible on the water. The acrobats and sideshow performers, the old man hawking cheap mechanical toys near Asakusa suggest Taoist immortals, or quirky figures from the *Zhuangzi* in harmony with the Way: all possess uncanny skills quite beyond verbal transmission. The schoolmaster in Seiken shows through in his use of top-spinning or tight-

rope-walking to illustrate, as homely parables, the eternal, universally applicable principles of Confucian classics, immanent in unlikely places. What is most humble, far from contradicting or offending the sublime, in fact embodies it.

Satirical content, a distinctive voice of *Edo hanjōki*, is a major element lacking in these excerpts. There is, to be sure, a certain mild criticism in the sight of the mad scramble of pleasure seekers on the water, or the gawking crowds at sideshows—all of whom, doubtless, could be using their time and resources to better advantage. The common masses of the city, however, are rarely the object of mockery. It is, rather, the eminent, those in positions of authority who fail to lead by personal example, who are the constant targets of Seiken's invective—worldly clerics, venal low-level administrators, and above all, hypocritical Confucian doctors, who spew forth streams of pious quotations, but in reality personify self-indulgence and depravity. The excerpts do, however, paint briefly the recurring counterweight figure to these unworthy potentates: the man of

true learning and integrity, who finds himself excluded from real influence, a marginal member or even an alien presence in his own society. Seiken's Edo is a world turned upside down, in which vulgarity and insincerity shine as prime virtues, while cultivation and superior character are liabilities. With a mixture of pride, amusement, indignation, and masochism, Seiken accepts the label *muyō* "useless" society has imposed on him—all the while conscious of what *Zhuangzi* terms "the usefulness of the useless," the valuable objectivity and undisturbed survival that only those relegated to obscurity can enjoy.

The locations mentioned in the translations are among the quintessential "bustling places" of Edo, and certainly would qualify on any tourist's itinerary. Both were locations of high foot traffic, offered some degree of public space (a rarity in the cramped city), and were zones of official indulgence—a combination of factors that encouraged entertainers as well as pedestrians to linger and savor the moment.

The Asakusa Kannon Temple—more formally, the Kinryūsan (Golden Dragon Temple), and popularly dubbed Sensōji—was near the periphery of Edo, but close to its spiritual heart. Long before the growth of Edo, in fact, Asakusa had been a center for the worship of the compassionate bodhisattva Kannon. The most holy relic of the temple was a two-inch statuette of Kannon retrieved, according to legend, by three fishermen brothers casting nets in the Sumida River in 628. The tiny image, however, was enshrined in a massive central hall, itself the hub of a large complex of temples, shrines, and sacred sites independent of any organized religion. Asakusa was the goal of countless pilgrims—and innumerable secular tourists. In Seiken's day—and still to the present—sacred and worldly Asakusa overlapped inextricably; salvation and temptation here coexisted in a comfortable paradoxical balance. Seiken pays lip service to the Asakusa of the guidebooks, but devotes more attention to the cheap souvenir booths and "midway" attractions crowding the main concourse to the temple, as well as to the Okuyama—an amusement district,

renowned for its unusual exhibits. Not far from the Asakusa complex stood the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, a miniature realm of carnality; from 1842 until the close of the Edo period, kabuki theaters as well were banished to the area from their more accessible downtown locations. In one spot, conveniently, Asakusa provided the last word in worldly and otherworldly opportunities.

Unlike Asakusa, which preserves remarkably well to this day the layout and ambience evoked by Seiken, Ryōgoku Bridge, a mile downstream, is now highly unmemorable: a nondescript concrete bridge and drab elevated train station are the limit of its enticements. Ryōgoku in Seiken's day, however, was a bridge second only in fame to Nihon-bashi. A constant stream of pedestrians bustled like ants over its great arch, almost six hundred feet long. Its colossal triple pilings were a favored contemplation for the idler or *ukiyo-e* artist. The bridge—a major link between the downtown area and the Honjo quarter across the Sumida—was first begun in 1659, as part of a concerted attempt to develop Honjo, and so relieve

the terrible congestion of the city that had proved so devastating during the Meireki Fire of 1657. At the east end of the bridge stood the Ekōin, a sanctuary built over the mass grave of 18,000 fire victims. At the east and west ends of the bridge, two open areas served as firebreaks, and places of refuge in the event of future holocaust. These plazas soon acquired a festive character quite alien to their somber beginnings, for they became the premier center of popular street entertainers and sideshow attractions, in Edo if not all Japan. The western plaza, on the side of Edo Castle, was the more sedate and subdued in its offerings; its eastern counterpart, however, on the far side of the river, was renowned for spectacles both unbridled and bizarre.

Ryōgoku was constantly crowded—but especially during the *suzumi* or "cooling off" season in high summer. Already by the seventeenth century, it had acquired a reputation as the preferred location in the city to escape the oppressive closeness and suffocating miasma of the difficult months. The inauguration of this time of

evening refreshment was the *kawabiraki*, or "river opening," held the twenty-eighth of the Fifth Month—a night made brilliant by a huge fireworks display over the river, sponsored by local businesses and restaurants. For exactly three months, Ryōgoku became a nightly carnival: lanterns on every side coaxed early-retiring Edoites to linger, shop, and carouse after sunset. Private or commercial pleasure boats plied the Sumida in numbers that must have defied any hope of leisurely navigation. Far from discouraging passengers, the joyful clutter of this authentic "floating world" proved irresistible to all classes.

Frequent shows of fireworks—rockets and stationary displays—were a prime attraction at Ryōgoku; their colors transformed familiar riverside settings into an unearthly fairyland. The first fireworks display at a *kawabiraki* was held in 1733, and was part of an attempt to eradicate pestilence and defuse urban violence during the Kyōhō Famine (1732-1734); it is also possible that the displays of night fires may have had some remote association with the fires lit outside

during the Bon festival of the Seventh Month, to guide the spirits of the dead on their annual return. These darker connotations seem to have been forgotten in the audiences Seiken depicts: all that remains for his spectators is a childlike wonderment, and a surge of civic patriotism at this display without parallel in the nation. Two rival firms, their staging platforms anchored on opposite sides of Ryōgoku Bridge, sought spectators' approval for their alternating volleys. Even when no major pyrotechnic displays were scheduled, a small fleet of private exhibitors clustered hopefully like gnats around the largest barges, offering to shoot fireworks from bamboo mortars or hand-held blowpipes for a few coins. Not surprisingly, explosions and fiery mishaps also contributed to the excitement of Ryōgoku nights.

The Okuyama and Ryōgoku areas, and to a lesser degree the firebreak below the bluff at Ueno, were prime locations for *misemono*, the ephemeral "shows" of Edo. Diaries, miscellanies, and often formal annals of the Edo period list in loving detail the nature of these displays—each

in constant competition with its fellows to satisfy an inexhaustible popular appetite for the strange and marvelous. Unusual feats or skills; wonders of nature (rare or imported animals, freaks of nature, human oddities); and remarkable handicrafts (miniature or gigantic constructions, automata, peep shows and machinery) were the main categories of display—though Seiken here discusses only the first of these groupings, the remarkable feats of comics, acrobats, and ropedancers, and concentrates on the more "high-tone" performances at that.

Immensely popular, the *misemono* shows were a constant attraction to natives of Edo, to say nothing of provincial visitors—many of whom lodged in the Bakuro-chō "hotel district" hard by Ryōgoku Bridge. The Ryōgoku plazas, as well as certain temple courtyards during *kaichō* (festivals held to commemorate the public display of sacred relics or images), became virtual temporary villages of *misemono* shows, a maze of makeshift huts surmounted by a forest of flapping vertical banners. Outside, the skeptic and the gullible

wandered with equal delight, taking in the lurid billboards and barkers' harangues; while from inside the enclosures rose a cacophony of drumming, half-heard "patter" from performers' assistants, and murmurs from an unseen audience, punctuated with unison gasps or shrieks. Seiken shows a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the shows, and distances himself from the performances by citing a lapse of twenty years since he last attended, or by mentioning that he bestirred himself to see the latest sensation at Ryōgoku only at the insistence of an out-of-town visitor. Certain portions of the description, indeed, reflect earlier written sources rather than personal observation, and Seiken seems to be making a composite picture of the highlights of the Okuyama and Ryōgoku during several cycles of "fads," rather than at any single point in time. In his eyewitness account of the trio of "leg acrobats," however, he shows himself completely enthralled by the uncanny performances before him—a rare moment of complete surrender to the vibrant chaos of the crowd, and personal integration with the prosperity of Edo.