

DISTRICT TO THE NORTH

Text for the dance

Hokushu sennen no kotobuki

by Shokusanjin

Introduced and Translated by
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INTRODUCTION

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 seventh volume

"Hokushu" (district to the north), the short title of this performance text, refers to the official pleasure quarter of Edo, the Shin-Yoshiwara, located in the northern part of the city. The text is attributed to Shokusanjin (Ota Nampo; 1749-1823).¹ The musical setting, for Kiyomoto vocal and samisen performers, was by Kawaguchi Onao, herself once a geisha.² Presumed to have been performed for the first time in the spring of 1818, "Hokushu" may have been composed in

memory of the famous courtesan Tamagiku mentioned in the text. The word "Kiyomoto" and the name of its leading practitioner, Enjudayu I (1777-1825), are also incorporated as verbal puns.³

Dance was not part of the first performance of "Hokushu." When it was that the founder of the Hanayagi School, Hanayagi Jusuke I (1821-1903) as he was known later in life, choreographed the solo dance that now, as often as not, accompanies the music of "Hokushu" is uncertain, but it was first performed in this way by geisha in the Yoshiwara. The dance is popular today in most schools of Japanese dance, though how faithful contemporary performances are to Jusuke's original is open to debate.⁴

The central sections of the song follow a seasonal progression – New Year's, spring, summer, autumn, winter. References to customs, ceremonies, clothing etc. associated with the Quarter are worked into the text. In addition, the learned author employs a host of subtle references to works of literature and to songs, legends and folklore about the Quarter to produce an elliptic, occasionally perhaps even opaque,

text that has been regarded as an encomium of the Yoshiwara. In making the translation, I have excluded explanatory material; as a result, much of the wit, hidden connectives and insinuations of the original has been lost.

The text of "Hokushu" lends itself to a variety of interpretations. At one level, it traces the maturing and emergence of a woman into the Quarter's professional activities and ceremonies. At another, albeit tentatively, it suggests a growing intimacy between a courtesan and her client/lover. If one thinks of "Hokushu" as a song for dance, however, another way to understand it comes to mind. Dancers today measure the success or failure of their performance by how effectively they realize – without recourse to costume, make-up and wig changes – various people and occupations suggested by the text. Eighteen such types, nine male and nine female, are said to be represented.⁵ Male roles in what we might think of as a danced ethnography of the Yoshiwara include: the guest on his way to the Yoshiwara adjusting his dress before arriving; the *taikomochi*, a professional jester at one of

the houses, not explicitly mentioned but imagined by the dancer as standing below the cherry trees of Naka-no-machi; the patron outside a lattice work grill gazing through the ribs of his fan at what goes on within; a young man wearing a traveller's hat; a visitor who, somewhat tipsy, wanders in the fields about the Yoshiwara; two samurai with woven hats that hide their faces; a man leading a pack horse; a merchant on market day selling New Year's decorations at Asakusa.

The women depicted are equally varied: a courtesan of the highest class (*matsu no kurai*); a woman writing a letter; another looking at her reflection in two mirrors; the courtesan donning a heavy outer garment (*uchikake*); a young girl in a long-sleeved kimono; an apprentice geisha; a young woman making her first appearance as a full-fledged courtesan; a courtesan who tells her fortune by the length of straws in a tatami mat; a young courtesan calling out to another during the traditional year-end ball-bouncing game. The list will give even a reader who has not seen Japanese dance an idea of poses and movements

in "Hokushu."⁶ One should not conclude, however, that today's dancers are satisfied with the imitation of the purely external aspects of the Yoshiwara's activities and professions.

A case has been made that the expression *oshigeri* ("fucking and talk between lovers" in the translation, though "drenching" might do) culminates earlier references to "pleasure-seeking" in the Quarter.⁷ From this point of view, "Hokushu" is more than a chronicle of the yearly events, seasonal activities and types of people one might have encountered there. As part of an ethnography of the Yoshiwara, these have their place. But at the center of the dance is a "Yoshiwara no koi no michiyuki," a travel account of love in the Yoshiwara system. *Shigeri* is the point of arrival.

"Hokushu" is also a song in praise of the Quarter. When Kiyomoto performers sing Shokusanjin's words, they become the empowering performer who according to ancient tradition sings things into being. If human sexuality in "Hokushu" symbolizes prosperity, at a deeper level the performance serves to guarantee its

existence. Fecundity, as folklore tells us and the countryside performance traditions of Japan demonstrate, is the economic base of a stable community. *Shigeri*, economic prosperity, the state at peace – the role of musicians, singers and a dancer coalesce at the conclusion to bring these about. The propitious element of "Hokushu" is clearest here and at the beginning, where felicitous expressions from the venerable "Okina" performance tradition can be found, such as crane, tortoise, and "Pleasures for a Myriad Decades."