

Intermezzo

John Ruskin and Kenji Miyazawa An Idea of Nomin-Geijutsu (Peasant Art) and its European Legacy

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Abstract My paper concerns an aspect of Ruskin's influence on modern Japan, focusing on the life and work of Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933), poet and author of children's stories, who organised *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* (Rasu Farmers Association) in the poverty-stricken farming communities of northern Japan, Hanamaki, Iwate prefecture, in 1926. The association was arguably influenced by Ruskin's Guild of St George, as well as by his commitment to the Working Men's College. Ruskin's work had been introduced into Japan during the Taishō Era (1912-1926), with quite a few works translated into Japanese, including *Unto This Last* and *Modern Painters*.

Keywords Kenji Miyazawa. Nōmin-Geijutsu (Peasant Art). Rasu Chijin Kyōkai (Rasu Farmers Association). Taishō Era. Modern Japan. John Ruskin. Guild of St George. Working Men's College.

Summary 1 The Foundation of *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* (Rasu Farmers Association). – 2 The Draft of *Nōmin-geijutsu Gairon Kōyō* (An Outline Survey of Peasant Art). – 3 The Problematics of the Japanese Term "Geijutsu". – 4 How Miyazawa Inherited Ruskinian Legacy.

1 The Foundation of *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* (Rasu Farmers Association)

The title of my paper might be considered, I fear, out of place of the general theme of "A Great Community: John Ruskin's Europe". In a way it is, as I focus on a Japanese poet, but I intend to show you some aspect of Ruskin and the European Legacy from my own circuitous route. I will start by giving a short biography of my protagonist, Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933), who was 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.



Figure 1 Unknown photographer, Portrait of Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933). Late 1920s. Kamakura Museum of Literature archives. © Wikimedia Commons

Born in 1896 in the small town of Hanamaki in Iwate Prefecture, the north-eastern part of mainland Japan (Tōhoku-chihō), a district once called “the Tibet of Japan” for its long, cold winters and grudging soil, 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 *Chumon no Oi Ryori-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 voluminous manuscripts of children’s tales, fairy tales and poems behind, including his masterpiece *Ginga Tetsudō no Yoru* (Night on the Milky Way Railway), most of which were published posthumously. Besides literary works, his many-sided activities included a high-school teacher, an agricultural engineer, an activist of the Nichiren Buddhist sect, an Esperantist, as well as a garden designer, a typical example of which is the “Tearful Eye” flower bed designed by Miyazawa in 1927, and he was a social reformer, advocating *Nomin-Geijutsu* (peasant art) to create a new kind of farming community. My paper mainly concerns the latter facet of Miyazawa as a social reformer, though we should not forget that it is closely connected with other activities. After graduating from Hanamaki Nōrin-Gakkō (Hanamaki Agricultural and Forestry School), Miyaza-

wa became a teacher at Hanamaki Nō-Gakkō (Hanamaki Agricultural School) in 1921. Taking the job, he developed close relationships with the farming community. He taught a new class called “The Art of Farming” through which he established friendly connections with the local boys who came as students. Subjects of the class he was in charge of were algebra, English, chemistry, agricultural production, agronomy, soil fertility and meteorology. He was also given an experimental paddy, a small field for rice cultivation.

Though he enjoyed teaching at the school, Miyazawa left the position in 1926 to establish *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* (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 he was the eldest son of the wealthiest family in the town, and this change of profession was very unexpected. His actions proved, however, that he was in earnest. At a riverside cottage owned by his family in Shimoneko, where he was staying at the time, Miyazawa 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 he cultivated during this period of his life.

2 The Draft of *Nōmin-geijutsu Gairon Kōyō* (An Outline Survey of Peasant Art)

It was probably shortly before he began his new life that Miyazawa 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 of ordinary peasants. It was, as Mallory Fromm, scholar of Miyazawa, 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”.¹ Hence the general obscurities of the text.

The name “*Rasu*” of *Rasu Chijin Kyōkai* is such an unfamiliar term in Japanese that a number of explanations have been proposed as to its meaning. Perhaps it came from English “rustic”, or just the reverse of “(a)sura”, a demon god of Indian or Buddhist mythology. One of the tenable etymologies is that it might be derived from the name “Ruskin”, as a critic Itsuo Onda first suggested.² Although Miyazawa does not actually mention Ruskin in the text, Katsumi Itō, his pupil and a member of the association, recalled later that Miyazawa stressed the importance of Ruskin in the class.³ This reference seems plausible as we can find definite connections between Miyazawa and Ruskin through William Morris, whose name Miyazawa does mention several times in

his “memo” for “A Revival of Peasant Art”. The association was arguably influenced by Ruskin’s Guild of St George, as well by his earlier commitment to the Working Men’s College.

As a matter of fact, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Ruskin and Morris were, along with Tolstoj, Kropotkin, Edward Carpenter, highly valued by Japanese intellectuals as the most important Western thinkers in the modern era. During the first quarter of the century alone, over twenty works by Ruskin were translated into Japanese, including *Modern Painters*, *Sesame and Lilies*, *Unto This Last*, to mention but a few.

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, one of the Japanese pioneer socialists), which was followed by Morris’s principal lectures on art and society: “Decorative (Lesser) Art”, “Art of People”, “Beauty of Life”, “Useful Works vs. Useless Toils”, “Art, Wealth, Riches”, “Art and Socialism”, and so on. It is not too much to say that Japanese versions of Ruskin and Morris flooded in during the period.

In “The Revival of Peasant Art”, Miyazawa 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.

¹ Fromm 1980, 96.

² Onda 1961.

³ Kawabata 1984, 33.

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 grey labour with Art!⁴

In the first two lines, we can notice a kind of Medievalism in Miyazawa's mind. He added some comments for the last line ("Burn away grey labour with Art!") 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'".⁵ Morris was probably brought to Miyazawa's attention by Hisao Honma, critic and scholar of

English Literature, who published *Seikatsu no Geijutsu-ka* (Making Life Art), a biography of Morris.⁶ However, reading Miyazawa'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 Morris's lectures in Japanese translation.

3 The Problematics of the Japanese Term 'Geijutsu'

It should be noted here that there is a certain difference in nuances between the word 'art' and the Japanese term 'geijutsu', though they are generally considered to be equivalent words, the latter being a translation word (hon'yaku-go) like 'minshu-shugi' (democracy), 'bunka' (culture), 'jiyū' (liberty), 'ren'ai' (love), 'bi' (beauty), or even the pronouns of 'kare' (he), 'kanojo' (she), and 'karera' (they).⁷ A Japanese encyclopaedia defines 'geijutsu' as "a general term given to one of the particularly human activities to create original value".⁸ When the Japanese people hear the word 'geijutsu', they usually associate it with distinctive 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, en-

graving, or sculpture. It is due to the particular ideology of the people 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, connotations it had. In short, 'geijutsu' was conceived as something remote from the daily life of common Japanese people including, of course, peasantry, that is over the half of the Japanese population in the 1920s. No one in pre-modern Japan certainly would have used the word with such an implication.

On the other hand, as we have just seen, 'art' had become increasingly alien word for working class people in Britain 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, inspired by Ruskin, insisted on the importance

⁴ Miyazawa 1984, ii.

⁵ Miyazawa 1997, 19. Unless otherwise specified, all the translations are by the Author.

⁶ Honma 1920.

⁷ See Yanabu 1982.

⁸ Hosoi 2013.

of “lesser arts” or “decorative arts”, he tried to stop such a monopoly. He declares, “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few”.⁹ 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”.¹⁰ 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 [...] 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.¹¹

It is precisely 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.¹² In other lecture on “Art and Labour” (1884), he proposes to take the word ‘art’ in a wider sense:

[B]y art, I do not mean only pictures and sculpture, nor only these and architecture, that is beautiful building 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.¹³

⁹ Morris 1914, 26.

¹⁰ Morris 1914, 18.

¹¹ Morris 1914, 18.

¹² Henderson 1967, 200.

¹³ Morris 1965, 94-5.

4 How Miyazawa Inherited Ruskinian Legacy

In Miyazawa's project for Rasu Chijin Kyōkai, we can discern definite influences of Ruskin and Morris. There are similarities between Miyazawa and the people engaged in the Arts and Crafts movement. Miyazawa, too, did not

want art for the few. "What does the word 'artist' mean to us?", he asks in "Creators of Peasant Art", a section of *An Outline Survey 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.¹⁴

Indeed, he found frequent 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 grey hair
standing behind me.
"What d'you intend to sow?" he asked me.
"I will sow seeds of red turnip", answered I.
"Never furrow like that, then", he said,
and he showed me the way himself, 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!"¹⁵

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 Miyazawa. About twenty young men joined. The majority were ex-pupils of Miyazawa from Hanamaki High School of Agriculture, and students who had attended his lecture series at Iwate Na-

¹⁴ Miyazawa 1984, 13-14.

¹⁵ Miyazawa 1995, 30-1.

tional High School. A few members were from Morioka, the biggest city in the area. The association's activities were at first only a few, but gradually they increased. A small 'orchestra' of six or seven youths was formed by Miyazawa, who sold some of his books to purchase the instruments. He held record concerts and story readings at the association on Saturday afternoons and evenings for whoever came, usually the local children.

Its activities were short-lived - only two years - as his physical condition declined during the period, and he died of a lung disease in 1933 at the age of 37. Nevertheless, his experiments of *Nōmin-geijutsu*, as well as his theory expressed in "The Outline Survey", were very unique and valuable, and still deserve close attention.

The years from 1910 through to the late 1920s, which include the Taishō period (1912-1925) and cover the period Miyazawa worked, were among the most crucial periods in modern Japanese history. Since the 1860s, when it opened its country to the world after two and half centuries of its isolation policy, the Meiji restoration

saw a drastic modernization throughout the country. The modernization sometimes took the shape of haphazard adoption of Western mode of industrialization, with the negative results of urbanization, destruction of the traditional way of life, decline of crafts as well as environmental pollution.

In this period there was a trend among Japanese intellectuals to introduce and translate the ideas of Western thinkers who were critical of industrialization in favour of the pre-modern mode of community. One significant aspect of the reception of Ruskin into Japan was linked to this trend. It can be said that Ruskin was invoked in the context as a thinker of Counter-Industrialization, with its emphasis on the values of the medieval guild system in which the working people were not "broken into small fragments and crumbs of life".¹⁶ Miyazawa's work can be contextualized in the general movement of *Nōmin-geijutsu* or "peasant art" and one of his great contributions was that he presented the Ruskinian idea of art and society to us in his own way as a vital European legacy still relevant for Japan today.

16 *Works*, 10: 196.

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