Gender and the Japanese Bunjin (Literati): Haikai Poet Tagami Kikusha (1753-1826)

Abstract
In contemporary Japan, membership in haiku groups is overwhelmingly female. However, in the early part of the Edo period (1603-1868), only 2-5% of poets writing haikai (the premodern name of haiku) were women. One of the most prominent of these early female haikai poets was Tagami Kikusha, whose life of incessant travel was inspired by that of Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694). Kikusha was a member of the Minô School of haikai, whose founder, Kagami Shikô, came to be called the “Haikai Demon” to contrast him from Bashô, the “Haikai Saint.” The title that Shikô promoted was simple, straightforward, and appealed to provincials, whose ranks at the turn of the 19th into the 19th century increasingly included women.

In my paper, I will consider the hokku (17 syllable verse) of Kikusha as exemplifying the Minô School style. How much did author’s allegiance to this approachable, populist school of haikai enable her to be a success as a poet, despite the restrictions imposed by her gender?

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