

Yamawaki Taka's Bittersweet Memories of Uwajima Castle, 1864–1865

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It was common practice for many nineteenth-century Japanese families to send their daughters away for a period of work or education before marriage. This paper examines the case of Yamawaki Taka 山脇たか (later Takako 高子 1851–1938), who left her home in Nagasaki to be employed as a palace servant at the residence of Lord Date Munenari 伊達宗成, daimyo of Uwajima 宇和島 domain, when she was thirteen years old. The purpose of this practice differed according to the families' status and financial means. In poorer families, daughters might be sent out for a period of indentured labour because their basic needs would be cared for and their families could benefit from the income which they brought in through their contracts. In wealthier families, daughters were also sent out for employment, but the intention was less for monetary gain than for an education in manners, deportment and the feminine arts. Samurai and commoner families alike sought positions for their daughters in the hope of preparing them for marriage.¹ The idea was that after receiving such an education women would be more socially mobile and able to form better matches when they married. From the perspective of the young women themselves, while the work itself was not always pleasant, going into service offered them the opportunity to experience life beyond the confines of their own households and neighbourhoods, and in some cases, to mingle with members of the elite.

Such was the case for Taka, who, although of commoner origins found herself suddenly propelled into the company of the lord and his wife. While the circumstances of her employment were so extraordinary that one must wonder whether they were unique, her experiences are interesting for several reasons. First, they offer a rare and personal glimpse into the work of palace maids. Second, they raise intriguing questions about the continuing use of women as a living form of collateral late into the Edo period. Evidence suggests that Taka went into service not for the sake of her own edification, nor to obtain a marriage partner but rather as a family hostage in order to guarantee a political favour from the lord. Finally, Taka's experience is suggestive of a further need to research the scope of women's geographical movements and their social and political impact in Tokugawa society.

Interpreting Taka's Personal Narrative

This study is based primarily on a collection of five letters that Taka wrote in 1935, in which she recalled her experiences as a maid at the castle.² It is only recently that these letters have gained any attention from historians, in part perhaps because researchers have been more interested in Taka's famous mother, Kusumoto Ine 楠本稲 (1827–1903).³ So far, no one has considered the curious

¹ Historians who have contributed to this topic include Mitamura 1956; Takeuchi 1993; Ōguchi 1995; Walthall 2005; Walthall 2008; Hata 2008; and Fukuda 2010.

² The letters are held by the Sentetsu Kinenkan in Uwamachi. Recently, they have been transcribed and published in *Mise Morofuchi: Siboruto saigo no monjin: Tokubetsuten zuroku*, published by the Museum of Ehime History and Culture. I have relied on the transcriptions of Taka's letters for the purposes of this paper.

³ On Kusumoto Ine, see Nakamura 2008; Orita 2015; Orita 2016.

nature of Taka's employment and the fact that she described herself in the letters as a "hostage" *hitojichi* ひとじち. Some historians have pointed to the unreliability of Taka's testimonies, noting that she made errors and exaggerated when compared with the information we have from other written sources. Here, I follow the feminist theoretical stance that an objective reliability is not what should be sought in Taka's letters. Rather, I seek to interpret the "truth of her experience," paying attention to the context and world view that helped to shape her narrative.⁴ Taka's letters were addressed to Nagai Otojirō 長井音次郎, a local historian who had been writing a biography of her first husband,—the man who was at the centre of the circumstances leading to Taka's employment.⁵ Many of the matters she wrote about appear to be prompted by specific questions that he asked her, but she also offered her own spontaneous recollections. Certainly her memories are made hazy by the seventy odd years which separated the events and the time when she recalled them. She herself notes that she just cannot remember some things. However, her letters are written in her own hand and offer a personal version of what she remembered about her work at the castle as well as insight into how she wanted herself remembered. Being a written account rather than a verbal interview, they represent a considered response to the questions asked of her.

Taka, Mise Morofuchi, and the Reasons for her Appointment

Taka was born in Nagasaki in 1851 as the only child of Kusumoto Ine, one of Japan's first female doctors of Western medicine. Her mother Ine was born of a relationship between Philipp Franz von Siebold, a naturalised Dutch citizen who came to work as a medical doctor to the Dutch factory in Nagasaki in 1823, and his Japanese concubine, Taki. According to Taka's own oral testimony, the circumstances of her birth were unhappy: her mother had been raped by her teacher of obstetrics and found herself pregnant. Filled with detest for her teacher, she left her place of study in Okayama and went back to Nagasaki where she raised her daughter with the help of her mother. Ine named her daughter Tada, meaning something like "for free," as a way of coming to terms with her fate.⁶ It was not until Taka went to work in the castle at Uwajima that she eventually received a new, and arguably more auspicious name.

Since Taka's employment in Uwajima came about through a series of extraordinary events involving her future husband, Mise Morofuchi (Shūzō 周三), it will be useful to first explain his part in the story. Mise was born in 1839 as the son of a salt merchant in Ōzu 大洲, the domain that neighboured Uwajima. His connection with Taka's family came about through his uncle Ninomiya Keisaku 二宮敬作 (1804–1862), a doctor of Western medicine who in his youth had studied with Siebold in Nagasaki. Ninomiya eventually settled in the town of Unomachi 卯之町 (in Uwajima domain) to quietly teach and practise medicine. Mise began studying Western medicine with his uncle in 1855, around the same time that Ine chose to leave little Tada in the care of her grandmother and continue her medical education with Ninomiya, her father's trusted student. As they lived and

⁴ The Personal Narratives Group 1989, pp. 261–264.

⁵ Nagai 1928.

⁶ This account was recorded as part of a number of oral interviews with Taka made by the Nagasaki historian Koga Jūjirō in 1924. It is preserved in the Nagasaki Museum of History as *Yamawaki Takako dan*.

studied together, Mise and Ninomiya and Ine became like family. Though it is unclear exactly when they were betrothed, Mise was the natural choice as a husband for Tada.

In the winter of 1855, Ninomiya suffered some kind of partial paralysis (possibly a stroke) and was prompted to seek treatment in Nagasaki. Mise and Ine went with him to Nagasaki the following year, where they continued their work and study. They were all still in Nagasaki when they learned that Siebold had been permitted to return to Nagasaki, thirty years after his departure. He was accompanied by his son Alexander, and came with the intention of contributing to diplomatic relations. On Ninomiya's recommendation, Mise was appointed translator and assistant to Siebold, and also was charged with teaching Alexander Japanese.

When Siebold and Alexander moved to Edo in the third month of 1861, Mise accompanied them as their translator. His linguistic skills were apparently excellent. Taka proudly recalled in her letters that "My grandfather Siebold taught Mise Morofuchi to interpret so well he was the best in Japan. His pronunciation was not in the least different from my grandfather Siebold."⁷ While Siebold's role in Mise's linguistic training was probably less important than Taka suggests, it was indeed Mise's proficiency in the Dutch language that led him into political difficulty not long after their arrival in Edo.

In Edo, Mise assisted Siebold with his translations, working on a Dutch-Japanese-English-French dictionary, and essays on the history of Japan and on the establishment of the *bakufu*. He was also called upon by Siebold to assist in his dealings with the Japanese in Edo, sometimes in an official capacity: a situation which seems to have raised the ire of the official translators. According to Ninomiya Tokinosuke 二宮時之助 (the *rusui* 留守居 of the Ōzu domain residence in Edo), "depending on the content they were sometimes unable to translate and Shūzō [Mise] was often called upon. The interpreters were. . . unhappy because since Shūzō arrived what had been managed well without him now became the source of some embarrassment. They planned to get rid of him at all costs and he was confined to the domain residence . . ." ⁸

This turn of events took place in the ninth month of 1861. Mise was apprehended in Yokohama before being placed under house arrest in the Ōzu domain residence in Edo. Initially, Mise seems to have thought that he was being detained because of his connection to Siebold. In a letter to Siebold explaining what had happened, he stated that the intention of the officials was to separate him from his master until an investigation was conducted. He was optimistic about the prospect of being released shortly.⁹ Before long, however, it was his status that was being questioned. He was accused of impersonating a samurai by the wearing of swords and his use of the surname Ninomiya. Moreover, it was not clear to which domain—Uwajima or Ōzu—he belonged, and in the circumstances neither domain was in a hurry to claim him. After being detained for some time in the Ōzu domain residence in Edo, he was sent to prison in Tsukudajima 佃島 and remained there (apart from a period when he was ill and returned to the Ōzu domain compound) until the eighth month of 1865.

Taka's mother Ine was one of the many supporters who helped to campaign for Mise's release. It was through this activity that Taka came to be employed at Uwajima castle. Lord Munenari, who

⁷ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, p. 124.

⁸ Letter from Ninomiya Tokinosuke to Fumotoya Kikusaburō, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, p. 114. The original is held in the Ōzu Municipal Museum.

⁹ Letter from Mise to Siebold. 10.17. 1861, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, p. 110. The original is held by the Siebold Memorial Museum.

ruled from 1844–1858, was particularly interested in Western learning and technology – an interest which encouraged him to elevate Ninomiya Keisaku in 1855 by granting him permission first to wear a sword and later *omemie* status, as well as protecting the *rangaku* scholar Takano Chōei 高野長英 when he was on the run from the Shogunate in 1848. He also supported quite a number of other *rangaku* scholars. Munenari retired from official duties after the Ansei purge of 1855, but continued to influence political matters from behind the scenes. It was Lord Munenari to whom Ine turned for help with Mise's release. Taka describes the events in one of her letters:

As soon as my mother Ine heard of it, she used her connection to Ninomiya Keisaku-sensei in Unomachi to ask the Uwajima lord for his help. The Lord ordered that if she had a daughter he would send officials for her to come immediately from Nagasaki to have her serve in the castle. So without ado I came to serve Princess Naohime as a maid in the detached palace of the castle.¹⁰

From Uwajima domain records, it is also known that Ine brought gifts to Lord Munenari and his son on the 23.3 Genji 1 (1864), including boxed imported cookies, sugar, coffee, and pickles. In return, Ine's medical skills were recognised and she received a stipend and the expectation that she might serve as a doctor in the women's quarters in the future. Historians have therefore suggested that Ine's gifts to the lord were a part of her job-seeking activity.¹¹ Is it not possible, however, that this was rather part of the bargain for assistance with Mise Morofuchi's release? Although the precise timing is unknown, 1864 was the year in which Mise was returned to prison after having spent some time in the Ōzu domain compound recovering from illness, therefore dashing hopes that he might be released. Domain records note that Ine arrived in Uwajima with Taka and a maid-servant on 7.11. of that same year.¹² This would fit in with the idea that Taka began her work in the castle shortly afterwards in the autumn.

Life as a Palace Maid

The fact that Taka was a political hostage and quite far away from her hometown made her route to employment rather unusual. The fact that she was a commoner rather than a samurai was not in itself surprising. According to research by Fukuda Chizuru 福田千鶴, many commoners were employed as palace maids, but they were usually in lower ranking positions where they were not entitled to have direct contact with the lord or his wife. Such appointments were often made by introduction whereby women already working in the palace would introduce their nieces or other relatives. There was a variety of such positions, which included work as maids-in-waiting (waitresses), cooks, tea servers, messengers, drudges, and wet-nurses.¹³ The daughters of samurai retainers might also be recommended or called up to serve in the palace. These women of good birth generally were appointed to higher positions in the palace.

¹⁰ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 4 October 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, pp. 125–126.

¹¹ *Mise Morofuchi*, p. 50.

¹² Orita 2015, p. 106.

¹³ Fukuda 2010, pp. 169–170.

Despite her commoner status, Taka was employed as a lady's maid or page to Lord Munenari's wife Naohime 猶姫. Her place of work was the Betsu goten 別御殿, or detached palace, which was the residence of retired lord Munenari and his wife. She was well suited to the work and soon received a promotion, according to a letter that her mother Ine wrote to a friend in the fifth month of Keiō 1 (1865): "As you know, since the autumn of last year, my daughter Taka has been up at the palace where she is working as a page (*koshō* 小姓). Since she worked so satisfactorily, she was quite unexpectedly ordered to become a true page (*koshō honyaku* 小姓本役), so her rank has increased and I am very thankful."¹⁴

While the rankings and offices of palace maids differed among domains, they can generally be divided into three types: administrative staff, personal attendants, and servants. Moreover, the maids could be assigned to either the lord or his wife. The administrative staff were the highest ranking, and they managed all of the affairs of the interior quarters. Such women needed to be highly educated, not only in writing, but also the abacus, flower arrangement, incense and poetry, and were expected to be of impeccable character.¹⁵ Personal attendants consisted mainly of pages, who were under the command of more high ranking attendants called *chūrō* 中老. It was their job to take care of the personal needs of the lord or his wife, to act as companions and take part in their retinues when they went outside. According to Fukuda, they received an additional clothing allowance and were treated quite well.¹⁶ The women selected for this position were talented and beautiful women who were considered appropriate to serve the lord directly. Sometimes they would advance to become concubines and bear the lord's children.¹⁷

It is interesting that Taka advanced to the position of *koshō honyaku* because this would normally imply that she had moved from a fixed term contract position (*yatoi* 雇) to a permanent one (*honyaku* 本役), with the expectation that she would be employed for life. Taka's letters are also suggestive of some confusion over the matter, at least in the eyes of Date Mune'e 伊達宗徳, the ruling lord at the time, who seems to have been exceptionally fond of her:

[Lord Mune'e] often used to visit Naohime-sama at the detached palace where I was working. From the time I became a page, he would call me "Taka, Taka," and call me over to talk, and he was fond of me. He told me I should stay and always serve Naohime-sama in the palace. He praised me for coming alone so far away from my mother in Nagasaki, and it is difficult to describe how kind his words were. The thought brings me unexpectedly to tears of gratitude. It seems he had not yet heard from Munenari-sama that I had come to serve in the palace because of Mise Morofuchi, and thought that I would be working there for life.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Kyōu shoya shozō shokanshū* 1, p. 92.

¹⁵ Fukuda 2010, p. 166.

¹⁶ It is not known how much (if anything) Taka received in wages. According to documents cited by Fukuda 2010, *koshō* in Tottori domain received a three-person stipend, 25 bales of rice, and pocket money of 8 *monme* and 3 *bu* in silver. However, as Leupp notes in his study of servants, shophands, and laborers, many child servants were not paid. Leupp 1992, pp. 60–61.

¹⁷ Fukuda 2010, p. 168.

¹⁸ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 45 p. 127.

Indeed, according to Taka's account, it was Lord Mune'e who helped to give Taka her new name. As noted at the beginning of this essay, she had been "Tada" until she began to work at the palace. It was normal to take a new name, for many palace maids took names from *The Tale of Genji* when they went to work in the palace.¹⁹ There is no record of Taka having used such a name, but instead she received the honour of being named Taka, which (unbeknown to her at first) had been the name of Lord Mune'e's first wife, who died not long after they were married.²⁰

What kinds of duties did Taka perform in the palace? While this is not entirely clear, she describes herself in her letters as doing lots of "busy errands," of a nature which required her to wear a simple kimono—with sleeves just slightly longer than usual—rather than the *furisode* 振袖 that was worn on special occasions. While many of her reminiscences evoke images of a luxurious and leisured lifestyle, she still described her work there as "hard work" (*tsurai tsutome* づらいとめ). On occasions when she was required to accompany the lord's wife on her duties, she wore a silk crepe *furisode* embroidered with varieties of flowers, and her obi tied in a *yanoji* knot. It was the duty of the pages to carry a sword to protect the lord's wife when necessary, to carry silver tobacco trays by her side, to fetch her palanquin, carry parasols to hide her noble person from view, and to carry her various items. Taka was particularly impressed with her mistresses' palanquin. Naohime came from the Nabeshima 鍋島 family of Saga domain, but her palanquin had apparently once come from her mother's family, who had married into the Nabeshima from the Shogun's family. Her palanquin was "patterned all over with gold leaf and the [Tokugawa] hollyhock crest, and scrollwork as well. It was so beautiful everyone was amazed when they saw it."²¹

It is also clear from Taka's letters that although she was an attendant to Naohime, she was sometimes employed to be a companion and serve drinks to the various Uwajima lords and their guests. On one occasion, she recalls that lord Munenari himself poured her a drink and put snacks into her mouth with his own chopsticks.²² She also recalls an embarrassing moment when they visited the Southern palace, occupied by the retired lord Munetada 宗紀 (Shunzan 春山, Munenari's adoptive father):

Shunzan-sama called me over and said that he had heard I came from Nagasaki and played the koto. Which style of koto did I play? I said I didn't know and at that he laughed heartily and everyone else laughed too. He then said that was understandable for a child, and I was relieved.

This anecdote also shows that Taka's mistress took an interest in her training, for upon their return to the detached palace, Naohime took Taka aside and told her that a koto teacher from Tokyo [Edo] had said that her style of koto was called Ikeda-ryū. She would make arrangements for him to come and teach her in Uwajima, and would herself teach her the Yamada-ryū. "Even after I married Mise Morofuchi I continued to study both Ikeda-ryū and Yamada-ryū," Taka recalls.²³ Later in life, when Taka had been widowed twice, it was her talent with the koto that helped her to make a living, and she continued throughout her life to play in both styles, as well as being able to play the shamisen and erhu.²⁴

¹⁹ Fukuda 2010, p. 167. Hata suggests that the taking of a name was essential. Hata 2008, p. 183.

²⁰ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 45, p. 127.

²¹ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 10 October 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 46, p. 128.

²² Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 10 October 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 46, p. 128.

²³ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 44 p. 126.

Historian Takeuchi Makoto 竹内誠 has described how wealthy townspeople in nineteenth century Edo—anxious to make good matches for their daughters—attempted to obtain positions for them in the residences of samurai. The increasing competition for such positions, however, meant that those women with a better education or special skill were more likely to obtain such an appointment. Takeuchi cites the example of the retired lord of Yamato Kōriyama 大和郡山 domain, who interviewed the young women himself so that he might assess their talents.²⁵ Parents were therefore obliged to invest in their educations and send them to lessons in dance, singing, koto, shamisen, and so on. Hata has noted that an interview was fairly standard procedure when making appointments to palace positions, and was followed by an “inspection of the woman’s residence, the presentation of family documentation, a move to the inner quarters, and the receipt of an appointment letter from the elder listing salary, name, and position.”²⁶ It is not known how many of these procedures Taka went through before her employment. Clearly, however, Ine had provided her daughter with a good level of education in the feminine arts that allowed her to not only make her way in samurai society, but to endear herself to her employers. It might incidentally be mentioned here that Ine, too, was able to play the shamisen.²⁷

Aftermath

In the eighth month of Keiō 1, Mise Morofuchi was at last released from prison and Taka was given permission to leave the palace and go into town to meet him at a relative’s home. In another example of her mistresses’ special affection for her, Taka claims that Naohime-sama did her face and makeup with her own hands and dressed her in a silk crepe kimono embroidered with flowers for the occasion. Moreover, Taka travelled in a palanquin with three attendants. This is the way she recalls their reunion:

At that time, my grandmother who had raised me since childhood was visiting Tanigawa 谷川 from Nagasaki. When I went to her, she was surprised at how I had changed into the palace style and she said “is it really Tada?” and everyone was astonished. Mise seemed to be incomparably happy at first but seeing everyone after such a long time he didn’t seem to know whether to be happy or sad and he was speechless with emotion. Mise Morofuchi had worked as a pharmacist to the sick people in the Tsukudajima prison and his hands and arms were burned black. It is difficult to find words to describe his appearance just after he came out of Tsukudajima. My sadness at seeing him the way he was made me reflect on the hard work in the palace I had done for him: there would be no happier thing or sadder thing in my life. . . . Mise Morofuchi loved me his whole life and treasured me and I was very happy and grateful for this.²⁸

²⁴ Tsukizawa 1992, p. 313.

²⁵ Takeuchi 1993, p. 13.

²⁶ Hata 2008, p. 183.

²⁷ According to a record left by Uwajima retainer Maehara Kōzan (1812–1892) he was entertained at a lively New Year’s gathering in 1858, where Ine played shamisen and Taka the koto. See *Maehara Kōzan ichidaihanashi*, p. 37.

²⁸ Letter from Otaka to Nagai Otojirō, 10 October 1935, cited in *Mise Morofuchi*, letter 46, p. 129.

Thus it was not in order to make an advantageous marriage that Taka embarked on a period of employment in Uwajima castle, but rather to rescue her betrothed from a desperate situation. Luckily, her future husband's talents in Dutch and English studies, as well as her mother's medical skills in Dutch-style medicine, were considered important enough to matter. Surely this is part of the reason for Taka's extraordinary treatment during her time at the castle. The other element in her success was probably her feminine artistic and musical talents that made her shine as a companion to the elite. Throughout the letters, she emphasises her gratitude: for Mise's affections, and for the kind treatment she received from the Uwajima lord and his wife. It is easy to think of a hostage as being a powerless political pawn, and perhaps young Taka was one. But as far as her letters reveal, she seems to have appreciated, rather than regretted the experience, and she looked back upon this time with nostalgia, tears, love, and gratitude.

Taka's reminiscences serve as a hazy but highly significant personal record of a woman working in the service of a daimyo's wife in late Edo-period Japan. As a child on the verge of womanhood sent to a castle far away from her home town, Taka was introduced to a new world: the elegant hairstyles, clothes and arts of the castle as well as the hard work and isolation that her new position entailed. While she describes herself as having been pawned as a "hostage," who was sent to work in the castle for political rather than educational or economic reasons, her letters show that she eventually came to appreciate the opportunities that the experience gave her. There is still much to be learned about the kinds of education women received as they worked in service in the homes of the elite, but a study of Taka's memories of castle life offers a rich and important example of how one woman remembered her transformation from Nagasaki commoner to palace maid.

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