

Okada Beisanjin and Intellectual Circles in Late Edo Osaka

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Introduction

During the Edo Period, *bunjin-ga* (literati painting) flourished throughout Japan, particularly in Kyoto and Edo. There were also *bunjin-ga* artists in Osaka, but these are less well-known. At that time in Osaka, several schools such as the *Kaitokudō* and *Konton-shi-sha* were established by intellectuals who belonged to the merchant class, and some of them contributed to the field of painting. For example, Kimura Kenkadō (1736–1802) introduced scholars, poets and books from China to artists in Osaka.

Among these *bunjin-ga* artists, Okada Beisanjin (1744–1820) created especially unique work. His style was based on Chinese literati painting and poetry, however, he sometimes used other sources. It can be assumed that Beisanjin was influenced by a number of different intellectuals and artists in Osaka, and in this paper I'd like to look at Beisanjin's work and the people whose company he kept.

1. Beisanjin: amateur artist

The name “Beisanjin” was an alias derived from the time when the artist, when he was young, worked at a shop selling rice. In a short passage on Beisanjin in the *Harima-kijin-den*, a historical account of eccentric characters in Harima province, it mentions that he read books or painted when he was free of work.⁽¹⁾ With his reputation as a man of varied talents spreading far and wide, he came to be employed in the storehouse of the Tōdō clan in Osaka. In 1790, *Naniwa-kyōyū-roku*, a kind of “Who's Who” of the Edo period, Beisanjin was regarded as a *gaka* (an artist) and *bunjin* (a notable person who enjoyed making art or writing in their spare time).⁽²⁾ He mixed with other people interested in culture and also painted in an atelier in a storehouse. After leaving the employ of the Tōdō clan, he passed his job on to his son Hankō and lived by himself near the Yodo River. The older he grew, the more energy he put into painting and poetry.

Beisanjin studied many Chinese literati paintings, often imitated their styles and referred to them by name in his pictures. Having said this, at the time, Japanese *bunjin-ga* artists had little opportunity to see actual works from China. They picked up information on Chinese literati artists from imported books such as *Hasshu-gafu* and *Kaishien-gaden*, the Japanese version of the *Jieziyuan Huazhuan*, and we can assume that

Beisanjin also must have referred to them regularly.

2. Intellectuals around Beisanjin

When Beisanjin was painting in earnest, Kimura Kenkadō was well known as a scholar who belonged to the merchant class. Kenkadō had studied painting under Ōoka Shunboku (1680–1763) and Yanagisawa Kien (1703–1758) from his childhood and worked not only in the style of literati painting but also of the Kano and Nanpin schools. He had also held several events, or ‘shogakai’, that is to say, gatherings of painting and calligraphy.

In 1783, Kenkadō wrote for the first time about Beisanjin in his journal *Kenkadō-nikki*, while Beisanjin was still working in the shop selling rice. The entry in the *Kenkadō-nikki* mentions that Beisanjin had visited Kenkadō 43 times between October 1797 and November 1801. On the subject of painting style, both Kenkadō and Beisanjin referenced *Taihei-sansui-zu* by Xiao Yun-Cong (1596–1673) in their paintings.⁽³⁾ In fact imagery from the reproductions of Xiao Yun-Cong's paintings in the *Kaishien-gaden* was widely reproduced or appropriated by Japanese artists.⁽⁴⁾ Kenkadō loved books and he collected many on the subject of painting. From this, it is obvious that both Beisanjin and Kenkadō referred to the same images, and it seems that Beisanjin borrowed books on painting from Kenkadō.

Totoki Baigai (1749–1804) was a *bunjin-ga* artist who knew both Beisanjin and Kenkadō. Baigai was a feudal retainer of the Nagashima clan, however, in 1797, he went on a long leave of absence and travelled to Nagasaki. During his stay there, he studied painting by Chinese artists who had come to Japan.

In the painting *Sansui-zu-kan* by Baigai, we can see a small boat on the Yodo River, being rowed by the artist. It reveals that Baigai was on good terms with Beisanjin as Baigai created the work while visiting Beisanjin's house during his leave of absence. Baigai retired from working with for the Nagashima clan and moved to Osaka in 1800, which allowed Baigai to get to know Beisanjin much more in his later years. It must have been very impressive for Beisanjin to hear about theories of literati painting which Baigai had studied in Nagasaki.

After the death of Kenkadō and Baigai, Beisanjin became close to Tsusaka Tōyō (1757–1825), who was a Confucian scholar from the Tōdō clan. Tōyō wrote a

poem telling how Beisanjin learned to appreciate sake after reaching the age of 70.⁽⁵⁾ In his 70s, Beisanjin frequently chose sake as a subject for his paintings and poetry. The relationship between Beisanjin and Tōyō brought out a talent for writing about sake. When he was 72 years old Beisanjin also wrote a verse on the topic for Tōyō on a hanging scroll entitled *Keishu-yukei-zu*.

3. New ground: Beisanjin's later years

In Beisanjin's later years, he started to portray subjects unlike other *bunjin-ga* artists, and worked with these motifs, as well as more traditional literati subjects. For example, *Shorei-kakusan-zu* and *Kigyusuiteki-zu* have Japanese traditional subjects, which had often been used by artists working in the Kano and Shijō schools. Also, he scribbled *kyōka* (comic *tanka* poems) on *Kasen-zu* and *Tora-no-zu* instead of Chinese poetry. When Beisanjin was commissioned to paint a *fusuma-e* (a sliding door painting), he complained that his fee was much lower than *chakushoku-kacho-ga* (colour birds and flowers) artists in the Shijō school would have got.⁽⁶⁾ Using traditional subjects, Beisanjin may have wanted to caricature the conservative imagery of the Kano and Shijō schools.

Concluding remarks

Beisanjin taught himself painting and poetry, but,

being able to mix with intellectuals and scholars, he created a mature style. His work was supported by the culturally fertile environment of Osaka. It is, however, questionable whether he could properly pursue his personal goals while he lived there. Beisanjin used a seal inscribed with '*riku-chin*', meaning 'hermit living as a common person'. Stamping this on his work, he was probably making fun of his own lifestyle.

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- (1) Mori Senzō, "Beisanjin no Kotodomo (Something about Beisanjin)", *Mori Senzō Chosakushū No. 4* (Tokyo: Chuō-Kōron Sha, 1971): 256–257.
 - (2) Tanaka Kisaku, "Naniwa-Kyōyū-Roku in Kansei 2", *Bijutsu Kenkyū*, no. 64 (April 1937): 31–42.
 - (3) Hashizume Setsuya, "Kimura Kenkado no Gagyō ni tsuite (The Art of Kimura Kenkado)", *Kimura Kenkado: Naniwa Chi no Kyōjin* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, January 2003): 138–143.
 - (4) Takeda Kōichi, "Sakaki Hyakusen no Sansuiga ni Tsuite: Chugoku Gafu to no Kankei wo Chūshin ni (Chinese-Style Shan-Shui by Sakaki Hyakusen: Focused on the Relationship with Chinese Books on Painting)", *MUSEUM*, no. 469 (April 1990): 22–38.
 - (5) Mori, op.cit.: 259.
 - (6) Kōno Motoaki, "Beisanjin Den Shōkō" (A Short Essay on Beisanjin's Biography), *Bijutsushi Ronsō*, no. 20 (February 2004): 99.