Navigating Literacies, Love and Gendered Epistolary Styles between Nagasaki and Leiden: Kusumoto Taki's Rediscovered Letter to Siebold, 1830

Abstract:
In December 2017, an unidentified Edo period letter written in a female epistolary style surfaced in the Special Collections of Leiden University Libraries. The sender of the epistle turned out to be Kusumoto Taki (1807–1869), a sex worker from Nagasaki who was in a long-term relationship with the German physician and scholar Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) during his stay at the Dutch trading post Dejima. When Siebold was forced to leave Japan in 1829, Taki stayed behind with their daughter Ine (1827-1903), who would become Japan's first female physician in Western medicine. After the separation, there was a short letter-exchange, but Taki's very first letter, that measures a stunning 3.4 meters, was only known through a more condensed Dutch translation that was created for Siebold, who could not read the original. This article introduces a translation and diplomatic transcription of the letter and adds Taki's own voice to the correspondence that tells of the arrangements in Nagasaki after Siebold left. It furthermore reflects upon the letter's gendered epistolary style, 'borrowed literacy', the role of translation in the letter-exchange, and the interpretation of this epistle as a 'love letter'. Letters were the genre in which commoner women were most likely to express themselves in writing, and this case study shows that by contextualizing such manuscripts carefully within contemporary practices, we can move away from interpretations of women's literacies that focus on shortcomings.

Keywords: Japan, Edo period letters, correspondence, women and literacy, translation, sex workers, Dejima, Kusumoto Taki (Sonogi), Kusumoto Ine, Philipp Franz von Siebold

Introduction

'For many years we were bound by a mysterious fate until increasingly worrisome events caused you to return last year. There is no day that I do not weep. Reading your detailed letters, I recall your face and long for the days gone by. As I can no longer see your face, I imagine that your letters are you and I cannot forget you a single day. Moreover, Oine understands everything and asks for you all the time, which makes my heart ache even more.' These words were addressed to the German physician and scholar Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866), who was from 1823 to 1829 stationed at the Dutch trading post Dejima in Nagasaki. The letter is signed 'Sonogi' 其扇 (see fig. 1), the professional name of Kusumoto Taki 楠本たき (1807–1869), who together with their two-year-old daughter Ine (1827-1903) stayed behind in Japan after the authorities had ordered Siebold to leave the country. Siebold played a major role in the introduction of Western medicine and science in Japan, and his ethnographical works shaped nineteenth-century European conceptions about Japan. Ine is

celebrated as the first female doctor in Western medicine in Japan. Taki, however, remains a side-character in the life-stories of Siebold and Ine, that continue to be retold for a variety of audiences.

Taki was from her mid-teens employed as a *yūjo* 遊女 (literally 'woman of play') by the Hiketaya 引田屋, one of the brothels in the Nagasaki 'pleasure quarter' Maruyama.[1] Some encounters between the Japanese sex workers and the men on Dejima resulted in long-term relationships, as was the case for Taki and Siebold.[2] Siebold, who arrived on Dejima in August 1823, practiced as a physician, taught Western medicine at his medical school Narutaki-juku in Nagasaki, and collected ethnographical objects, plants, and animals. Taki and Siebold's daughter, Ine, was born on May 31, 1827. However, Siebold and Taki would soon be separated due to what is known as the 'Siebold-incident'. In September 1828, the Dutch ship waiting in the bay of Nagasaki to leave for Batavia (Jakarta) was grounded by a storm, which incited the authorities to inspect its cargo. The discovery of several objects including maps of Japan led to a suspicion of espionage. Siebold's Japanese informants were severely punished and Siebold himself was banished. According to law, Taki and Ine had to stay behind. The ship that Siebold boarded left Nagasaki Bay on January 3, 1830, and arrived in Batavia about a month later.

While waiting for the next ship to depart for The Netherlands, Siebold sent Taki three letters, dated March 4, 7 and 14. The letter that is the main subject of this article, dated December 25, 1830 (Year of the Tiger, 11th month, 11th day), forms Taki's answer. The manuscript, consisting of four pieces of folded paper, was tucked into a folder titled 'Japanese text samples' (*Japansche textproeven*) in the archive of Johann Joseph Hoffmann (1805–1878), the first professor of Chinese and Japanese at Leiden University.[3] What initially caught my attention was the manuscript's writing style, that suggested a letter by a female sender, and the sentence 'Oine understands everything and asks for you all the time, which makes my heart ache even more' in the first part of the epistle (fig. 2).[4] Hoffmann only started to study Japanese after he met Siebold in 1830. He might have obtained and kept the letter as an object of study after Siebold, who could not read it, lost interest in it. Till 2017, only an imprecise Dutch translation of this first letter was known, made by Siebold's student and Rangaku (Western learning) scholar Kō Ryōsai 高良斎 (1799-1846), and it was moreover placed wrongly in the chronology of Siebold's correspondence with Taki.[5]

[1] Jūjirō Koga, *Shintei Maruyama Yūjo to Tōkōmōjin (Kōhen)* (Nagasaki bunkensha, 1969), 473–74.
[2] In the early nineteenth century, a sex worker's stay on Dejima could be renewed indefinitely with her consent and the client's continued payment. Amy Stanley, *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 2012), 79.
[3] Three of the four pieces were originally connected, this has been restored in the meantime.
[4] Several Japanese newspapers wrongly identified Miyazaki Katsunori as the discoverer of Taki's letter (also taken over in Ellen Nakamura, "Kusumoto Ine (1827–1903): A Feminist Reappraisal," *Japanese Studies* 40, no. 3 (2020): 255.). While not its discoverer, Miyazaki's assistance in the transcription and contextualization of the letter within Siebold's correspondence has been of great value, for which I would like to express my gratitude.
[5] Ranzaburō Ōtori, Japaninstitut, and Nichi-doku kyōkai, eds., *Shiiboruto Kankei Shokanshū* (Tokyo: Ōi Kyūgorō, 1941), 64–65. (See https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/1877004/1/56, accessed 20 July 2024) Letter #55 is Kō Ryōsai's Dutch translation of Taki's first letter, followed by a modern Japanese translation, while letter #54 is Taki's second letter (sent in 1831, not 1830).

As Anna Beerens observes, next to the famous examples of 'female erudition', literate women can be found in the margins of the life histories of literate men. However, 'information about female literacy is often given cursorily and inconspicuously' as 'the rhetoric of the writing directs our attention to the hero of the biography'.[6] The literacy of less erudite women has moreover been interpreted mainly from the perspective of 'male' epistolary styles, public forms of writing, and modern Japanese. Richard Rubinger in his *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* (2007) states that what better than average educated women learned 'was in all likelihood heavily laced with *kana*, but they were able to exchange letters',[7] overlooking that women's letters were per definition written in a now obsolete *kana*-based style.

Rather than merely considering Taki's letter as an extra piece of evidence in the narrative of the male hero (Siebold), this article focuses on how Taki navigated her situation and (lack of) literacy. Following an annotated translation of Taki's letter, this article places her message within the context of the surrounding correspondence, giving us a vivid impression of her situation after Siebold left. The article furthermore addresses the letter's gendered epistolary style, the fact that the letter seems to be the result of 'borrowed literacy', the typification of the epistle as a 'love letter', and the role of translation in the correspondence. Finally, this case study shows that literate women were not just producing flawed versions of the kinds of texts produced by better educated men. Shifting our attention to (real) letters, we find literacy that is 'different' and has its own range of fluencies and strategies in both private and public contexts. The appendix contains a diplomatic transcription of this unique manuscript, with the aim of facilitating further study of Edo period women's letters, beyond the erudite and the printed models.

Taki's Letter

The full letter reads as follows:

> Thank you for your three letters of March four, seven and fourteen. I am delighted to hear that you are in good health. Oine and I are also well. I was worried about the sea trip, but it reassures me to hear that you arrived safely [in Batavia].
>
> For many years we were bound by a mysterious fate until increasingly worrisome events caused you to return last year. There is no day that I do not weep. Reading your detailed letters, I recall your face and long for the days gone by. As I can no longer see your face, I imagine that

This has in the meantime been corrected in Yoshikazu Ishiyama and Teruyuki Kaji, eds., *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei* (Yasaka Shobo, 2023)., that introduces a transcription of Taki's first letter from Aafke van Ewijk, "1830 Nen 12 Gatsu, Kikoku Shita Shiiboruto e Sonogi Ga Okutta Saisho No Tegami (The First Letter That Sonogi Sent to Siebold after His Return to The Netherlands, in December 1830)," *Narutaki Kiyō* 29 (2019): 33–48. I comment on the Kō Ryōsai's choice of words in

[6] Anna Beerens, "In the Shadow of Men: Looking for Literate Women in Biography and Prosopography," in *The Female as Subject : Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan*, ed. P. F. Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G. G. Rowley (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 114–15.

[7] Richard Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 121.

your letters are you and I cannot forget you a single day. Moreover, Oine understands everything and asks for you all the time, which makes my heart ache even more. Oine also keeps asking about Orson[8] every day and she reminds me of you even more. Please imagine how I feel.

Furthermore, I will never forget what you wrote in your letter. Please don't worry about Oine and myself and rest assured that my uncle takes care of us. There is really no need to trouble yourself. The only thing I wish for is that you can live in good health. We worry about you in the same way that you worry about us. I ponder every day why we met with such a fate. Again, please don't burden your heart with our situation and I will devote my prayers to your health. Besides, I really appreciate what you wrote in your letter.

[Item] I am happy to hear that your mother is well.[9] Please give her my regards. I imagine she must have been very worried all those years you were in Japan.
[Item] Thank you for all the presents. I will not forget the favour to receive presents from such a faraway country. I can confirm that I received the amount of ten *kan* silver. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for sending this to us from over the far mountains and the sea.
[Item] I will not forget what you wrote in your letter. However, I think it is against the accepted practice. I will not forget.
[Item] I would like to present a snuff box to your mother. It is decorated with Oine's picture. It looks exactly like her. Please convey this to your mother.
[Item] To you, I also present a snuff box. It is decorated with both the pictures of myself and Oine.[10] They are faithful portraits. Please look at the box every morning and evening and think of it as Oine and me.
[Item] I am relieved to hear that Orson is well and recovered from his illness. Please give him my regards. I sent him twenty rolls of tobacco, a pair of *geta* (wooden clogs), a pair of *zōri* (sandals), and a tobacco pouch. They are just some souvenirs.
[Item] I understand that Higatohen[11] is well, please give him my regards.
[Item] Furthermore, I intended to send you more souvenirs, but I have been quite belated. Please forgive my inattentiveness. I will have to conclude my letter. I am looking forward to your letter of next year. Please live in good health. Here, I can do nothing more than pray for your health and longevity day and night. Please, send me a letter next year, even if it is only a few words. I will earnestly wait for it. There is much more I want to say, but I will write it in a next letter. With reluctance I stop my brush.

[8] Orson was Siebold's young Malay servant, who went with him to Batavia.
[9] In his letter from March 14 Siebold informs Taki that both his mother (Maria Apollonia Siebold, 1768–1845) and uncle (Franz Joseph Lotz, 1765–1839, who became Siebold's guardian after the death of his father) are in good health, a message that apparently reached him in Indonesia.
[10] The two snuffboxes are currently in the collections of the Wereldmuseum Leiden (RV-1-2009) and the Siebold Memorial Museum (Nagasaki).
[11] It is unclear whom Taki is referring to here.

Respectfully yours,

Sonogi
Year of the Tiger, 11th month, 11th day [25 December 1830]

to Mr. Siebold

Taki added the following postscript:

I must repeat that I hope you will live in good health. We do the same, please be assured.
[Item] From the thirteen pieces of fabric that you sent me I received only ten. Three pieces are missing. Please be careful in the future, even if you would send just some small items. I spoke about this to the painter [C.H. de Villeneuve], so please ask him for the details. I am greatly indebted to him, so please thank him.
I am also much obliged to Mr. Naonosuke [the translator Matsumura Naonosuke] and Mr. Ryōsai [Siebold's student Kō Ryōsai]. Please write some words of thanks to them in your next letter.
Lastly, I thank you for the presents of seven rings, three hairpins, one comb made of tortoise shell, and ten thimbles.

Alimony, Gifts and Promises

Taki received Siebold's three letters mentioned at the beginning of the letter in or after August 1830, when two Dutch ships arrived in Nagasaki, the Anna Catharina and Neerlands Koningin. Her answer was sent with one of these ships, that were ready to weigh anchor on January 1, 1831.[12] Considering that the letter is dated December 25, it was written last-minute, giving also Siebold's student Kō Ryōsai little time to produce the Dutch translation that Siebold received together with the original in the summer of 1831. Ryōsai's translation is significantly shorter.[13] Not only did he condense Taki's repeated words of longing and reassurance, but he also left out some of her words of thanks, of which the absence of any mention of the ten *kan* 貫 silver (1000 tael) is most conspicuous. Although its elimination may have served a purpose (the less people know about such transactions, the better), it must have worried Siebold, especially as smaller gifts seem to easily disappear. Apart from the missing pieces of cloth mentioned by Taki at the end of her letter, in Siebold's letter from March 4, we find other items such as saffron and a small crystal plate, that do not appear in Taki's message.[14]

[12] See *Dagregisters*, No. 245 and No. 246, Nationaal Archief, The Hague.
[13] Ōtori, Japaninstitut, and Nichi-doku kyōkai, *Shiiboruto Kankei Shokanshū*, 64–66. Letter #55 (the main letter) and #57 (the postscriptum). A photostat copy of this letter is held in the Tōyō bunko archive (no. XVII-1-B-6-183). See also note 5.
[14] Siebold to Sonogi, March 4, 1830 (Burg Brandenstein archives, 0302).

However, the ship that brought Taki's letter also carried a letter by Siebold's assistant, the apothecary Heinrich Bürger (1806–1858). The latter writes that together with Carel Hubert de Villeneuve (1800–1874) he delivered one thousand tael in cash to Taki, who entrusted it to her uncle.[15] Although this uncle is described positively in both Taki's and Bürger's letters from December 1830, as the letters traveled around the world, the uncle started to show his true colors. From Bürger's letter dated December 28, 1831, we learn that he tried to marry Taki off to his elderly friend against her wishes.[16] Bürger intervened and Taki and Ine moved to the house that he had built for his son Asakichi and his Japanese partner Tsune (Taki's sister), who had passed away in the summer of 1831. This letter furthermore tells us that De Villeneuve and Bürger with some difficulty managed to reclaim the money from the uncle, added 500 tael from their own pocket, and entrusted the sum to the Kompradoor (comprador) on Dejima, so Taki and Ine could live off the interest. The conscientious Bürger moreover asked Siebold to contribute another 500 tael, while adding how he himself set aside 3000 tael for his son.

Taki furthermore writes rather mysteriously 'I will not forget what you wrote in your letter', which refers to something that is moreover 'against the accepted practice'. Most likely she is referring to a promise that took enormous proportions without Siebold's knowledge, due to a translation mistake. In his letter from March 4, 1830, Siebold writes 'in case I die, Oine and you will get a fourth of all my possessions' (*waneer ik mogt sterven als dan kreigt Oine en gij een vierte van al wat ik heb*). However, the Japanese translation made for Taki says that Siebold will give *all* his possessions to them if he were to die.[17] The conditional may refer to the dangerous sea voyage. As Siebold arrived safely in The Netherlands, the promise was not tested.

From Taki's and Bürger's letters from 1831, we learn that in spring of that year, Taki married a craftsman called Wasaburō. Sex work did clearly not limit her opportunities to lead the life of a married townswoman.[18] Bürger reports Wasaburō to be an honest and hard-working apprentice, expected to establish his own tortoise-shell workshop in a couple of years.[19] Taki tactfully frames her new marital status as her *yoginaku giri* よきなくぎり

[15] Heinrich Bürger to Siebold, December 31, 1830 (Burg Brandenstein archives, B17.Fa.b278).
[16] Tae Nofuji et al., "1831-Nen Byurugaa Ga Shiiboruto Ni Dashita Shokan," *Kyūshū University Museum Bulletin* 11 (2013): 38–43.
[17] *Wamoji tatoi shinuru toki wa komoji mochimono wa ichi ichi nokosazu katami to shite futari e okuriyari sōrō beku sōrō* わもし（私が）たとひしぬるときハ、こもし（私の）もちしものハいち／＼のこさすかたみとしてふたりへおくりやり候へく候 'If I would die, I will give all my possessions, without exception, to the both of you as heirlooms.' *Wamoji* 我文字 is in this letter interchangeably used as 'I' and 'you'. The attachment of *-moji* to part of a word is characteristic of so-called *nyōbō kotoba* 女房詞 (women's language), a type of vocabulary that trickled down from aristocratic women to the common people. *Komoji* should be *kokomoji* こゝもじ（此処文字）but the iteration mark is missing. Yoshikazu Ishiyama and Katsunori Miyazaki, "1830-Nen 3-Gatsu Kikoku Tochū No Shiiboruto Ga Sonogi Ni Okutta Tegami," *Seinan Gakuin Daigaku Hakubutsukan Kenkyū Kiyō* 8 (2020): 9. The difference in meaning with the Dutch original is however not addressed by Ishiyama and Miyazaki.
[18] Different from those living in the closed quarters in Edo and women who were indentured far away from their villages, most Nagasaki sex workers kept ties with the town and their natal families, while men from similar social backgrounds would attach little value judgement to sex work. Stanley, *Selling Women*, 89.
[19] Nofuji et al., "1831-Nen Byurugaa Ga Shiiboruto Ni Dashita Shokan," 38–39.

(necessary duty)[20] towards Ine, equally describing Wasaburō as a very reliable young man, and moreover a good stepfather.[21] Only two other letters from Taki (sent in 1832 and 1845) are known from the period in which Siebold resided in The Netherlands.[22] Both are written in Dutch by a Japanese interpreter. In the letter from 1845, Taki mentions that she sent letters by way of the head official at Dejima for ten years but did not receive any from Siebold.[23]

Gendered and Borrowed Literacy

Taki's letter is written in the specific style of women's letters, known as *nyohitsu* 女筆 (women's brush). The word *nyohitsu* was from the early Edo period used to refer to calligraphy *by* women as well as example letters *for* women, written by male calligraphers.[24] Although some scholars use *nyohitsu* only in reference to the sophisticated *chirashigaki* 散らし書き (scattered writing), many published letter-writing manuals (*yōbunsho* 用文書) from the later Edo period introduce also letters in *narabegaki* 並べ書き (writing in vertical rows). Letters by commoner women in the late Edo period generally follow the latter, more straightforward design.

Women's letters were largely written in the *hiragana* syllabary, yet as Laura Moretti points out, mastery of epistolary language was more complicated than a simple trajectory from *kana* to *kanji* literacy.[25] Taki's letter makes use of ligatures typical for women's letters, such as (*medetaku* めで度) *kashiku* かしく, a greeting comparable to 'yours sincerely', and *mairase sōrō* まいらせ候 (see fig 3). Moretti terms this linguistic variant '*mairase sōrōbun* style', to differentiate it from the equally artificial male counterpart *sōrōbun* 候文, that also features the formal supplemental verb *sōrō*, but not the humble *mairase*.[26] The gender of a text did not necessarily concur with the gender of the person holding the brush, and men might adopt the 'female' style when addressing women.

From the perspective of translation, gendered epistolary styles proved a double challenge in Taki and Siebold's correspondence. Siebold's letters dated March 4, 7 and 14 were written in Dutch, and translated into the '*mairase sōrōbun* style' by an anonymous person (see fig. 4).[27] Siebolds' next letter, written from Leiden and dated December 23, 1830, a week before Taki posted her first letter from Nagasaki, is however written in Japanese. Or rather, in a variant of this language. Siebold wrote in one of his earlier letters from Batavia (March 4): 'a Chinese man is coming with me who will help me write a Japanese letter to you from Holland' (*ook komt een Chinees met mij die zal van Holland aan u Japansche brief helpen schrijven*). This Chinese man is Guo Chengzhang 郭成章 (1802–?), who assisted

[20] 余儀なく義理
[21] Taki's letter second letter from November 1831. Letter #91 in Ishiyama and Kaji, *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei*, 116–17.
[22] Ishiyama and Kaji, 126–32. Siebold came back to Japan in 1859.
[23] Ishiyama and Kaji, 127.
[24] Yoshinaga Koizumi, ed., *Nyohitsu Tehon Kaidai* (Seishōdō shoten, 1998), 4.
[25] Laura Moretti, *Pleasure in Profit : Popular Prose in Seventeenth-Century Japan* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 186–90.
[26] Moretti, 189.
[27] Transcriptions of these translations appear in Ishiyama and Kaji, *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei*, 92–95.

Siebold in his scholarly pursuits and taught the principles of Classical Chinese to Hoffmann in the period 1830-1835. However, the '*mairase sōrōbun* style' being very different from Sino-Japanese texts, Guo could hardly have been able to help Siebold read or produce this kind of letter. Siebold's letter from Leiden is entirely written in *katakana*, on stationary adorned with flowers (fig. 5).[28] Yet his attempt to communicate in Taki's language did not fit within any kind of Japanese epistolary form. Taki had this letter also 'translated' into the '*mairase sōrōbun* style' (fig. 6), bringing it truly into the 'feminine' sphere that Siebold had tried to create through the flowered stationary.

Taki's letters from 1830, 1831 and 1859 (that has been ascribed to Ine), as well as the Japanese translations of Siebold's letters, seem to have been written in different hands.[29] This means that she could either not write or believed others could do it better. The letters also contain conspicuous differences in the choice of words. For example, the feminine term *wamoji* わもじ (see note 16) appears repeatedly in the translations of Siebolds letters as well as in Taki's second letter (fig. 7) but does not appear in her first letter. Yabuta Yutaka in his study of women's literacy in a well-to-do Edo period commoner household observes that 'writing' is not necessarily 'something that one carried out oneself but something that others could be asked to carry out on one's behalf'.[30] He furthermore points out that 'family separation' was an important circumstance that prompted women to write.[31] These observations both apply to Taki's situation. Family separation is what prompted her to communicate in writing, and to find people to write letters *for* her. Since she had translations made of Siebold's letters in the '*mairase sōrōbun* style', Taki's reading skills might have been better than her writing skills, or she wanted to preserve Siebold's messages in a language appropriate to Japanese letter-writing conventions, that could be read to her by a friend, and in the future, her daughter. Although the possibility that Taki was assisted by (a) male writer(s) cannot be ruled out, it would be a stretch to assume that she had to rely on men for this task. Assistants might not only be found among better educated townswomen, but

[28] Letter #84 in Ishiyama and Kaji, 101–2. The handwriting of the letter indeed seems to be Guo's (upon comparison with his published calligraphies, see Willy F. van der Walle, "Between Sinology and Japanology: Léon de Rosny and Oriental Studies in France," *Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia*, 2021, 41.). Guo was hired for his excellent writing skills in Chinese, that were also applicable to Sino-Japanese varieties, but could not speak or read vernacular Japanese. Hoffman learned Malay to be able to converse with Guo, whose native language was Hakka. Sinologist Koos Kuiper suggested in an email to me (August 2024) that the letter in *katakana* is thus probably a copy of a draft drawn up by Siebold. A photostat of such a draft is indeed known (letter #88 (pp. 110─111) in Ishiyama and Kaji). The first part looks like an earlier try by Guo, while the last part may be Siebold's handwriting as it is clearly written by someone not used to writing Chinese characters. I have earlier speculated that Guo also tried to decipher Taki's original letter with Hoffmann with the help of a book of letter samples for women held in Leiden University Libraries, but the annotations found in this book are probably written by a later Japanese visitor to Leiden. (Aafke van Ewijk, "Het Raadsel van Het Damesjapans: De Rol van Vertaling in de Briefwisseling Tussen Siebold En Taki, 1830-1831" 26, no. 3 (2019): 16–23.) The words and grammar of Siebold's letter in *katakana* thus reflects the basic vernacular Japanese that he picked up in Nagasaki. He wrote all his other letters to Japanese correspondents in Dutch.

[29] Note, for example, the difference between *mairase sōrō* in the first letter (fig. 3) and the second letter (fig. 7, e.g., last ligature of the fifth and eleventh line).

[30] Yutaka Yabuta, "Nishitani Saku and Her Mother: 'Writing' in the Lives of Edo Period Women," in *The Female as Subject: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan*, ed. P.F. Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G.G. Rowley (University of Michigan Press, n.d.), 149.

[31] Yabuta, 144.

also among (former) sex workers from Maruyama for whom letter-writing was an important skill that contributed to the business.[32]

Love Letters

The first section of Taki's letter reads as a love letter, and as such it was brought to the attention of a general audience, but this interpretation needs critical examination for several reasons. First, the typification romanticizes a reality in which Taki was, as discussed earlier, indentured at a brothel and dependent on Siebold (and his acquaintances) for her own and Ine's livelihood. Second, there must also have been a degree of psychological dependence, as becoming Siebold's 'wife' saved her from worse scenarios. Third, although the description of the heartbreak is vivid, women in Taki's (former) line of work also exchanged 'love letters' with customers as part of the business. To what degree Taki's unidentified assistant was involved in the contents of the letter we cannot know, but the presence of this person equally invites caution with regards to the idea of the letter as unmediated passion, which merely feeds the narrative of Siebold as a deeply admired figure.

In woodblock prints, we find female paragons of the pleasure quarters occupied with stylized 'love letters', either in the process of writing, or reading a letter from a customer.[33] Yet what is hardly discussed is that by the late Edo period, the 'love letter' also played an important role in the business of less erudite sex workers. *Yūjo anmon* 遊女案文 (Letter drafts for *yūjo*, 1796) and the adaptation *Yūjo bunshō taisei* 遊女文章大成 (Compendium of letters for *yūjo*, 1806) were specifically published as collections of example 'love letters' and advice for sex workers.[34] The author of *Yūjo anmon* considers letter-writing the 'everyday work of a *yūjo*'.[35] The examples (all in the straightforward *narabegaki*) include themes such as 'New Year's greetings', 'letter to a second-time customer', 'letter to a customer who has not visited in a while', 'letter for the day after a quarrel', 'letter to an older man', 'letter on the day after becoming someone's mistress (*irojitate* 色仕立)', 'inviting a customer to a tea ceremony', and 'requests [for money or other things]'.[36]

The aim of the average letter was to let a paying customer believe that the *yūjo* is in love, or at least to let him play this game.[37] Women working in Maruyama brothels also

[32] Katagiri suggests that brothel owners may also have ordered *yūjo* to write to a well-paying customer. Kazuo Katagiri, *Dejima Yūjo to Oranda Tsūshi: Nichiran Kōryū No Kage No Tateyakusha* (Bensei shuppan, 2018), 79.
[33] Noriko Itasaka, "The Woman Reader as Symbol: Changes of the Woman Reader in Ukiyo-e," in *The Female as Subject: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan*, ed. P.F. Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G.G. Rowley (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 87–108. The appeal of such prints may have been that the buyer could imagine himself to be on the other end of such a correspondence. Toyoaki Watanuki, *Edo No Koibumi: Iiyoru, Kudoku, Mono Ni Suru* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2014), 158. Also Julie Nelson Davies observes that 'by calling attention to his [the client's] absence, the letter signifies his presence, and by association it places the viewer in the role of the object of her ardours, as he is the owner of the scene before him'. Julie Nelson Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 129.
[34] Koizumi, *Nyohitsu Tehon Kaidai*, 203–4. *Yūjo anmon* and *Yūjo bunshō taisei* are alternatively titled *Yūjō anmon* 遊状案文 and *Yūjō bunshō taisei* 遊状文章大成.
[35] The author of these works, like many late Edo period letter-writing manuals for women, is male. See the introduction of Koizumi, *Nyohitsu Tehon Kaidai*.
[36] National Diet Library, https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/2539863/1/5 (accessed 18 April 2024)
[37] Watanuki, *Edo No Koibumi*, 156.

engaged in this practice, even sending letters to Dutch customers who could not read them. The national archive in The Hague holds over seventy letters by six different sex workers that were sent to Jan Cock Blomhoff (1799-1853), who was *opperhoofd* (director) of Dejima from 1817 to 1824.[38] Numerous letters remind him of the fact that the sender misses him dearly and that Ka-*sama* (short for 'kapitan') only needs to ask for her.[39] The Japanese interpreters who assisted the Dutch provided translations in the form of keywords jotted next to the Japanese text, maybe supplemented with an oral explanation. Like the examples from *Yūjo anmon* and *Yūjo bunshō taisei*, adjectives such as *natsukashi* なつかし (missed, beloved) and *ureshi* うれし (delighted) make a frequent appearance, expressing attachment to the customer. A woman who goes by the name of Hana, and who writes Blomhoff most frequently, moreover repeatedly refers to their 'inexplicable bond' (*fushigi na go-en* ふしぎなごえん)[40] and supposedly thinks of him day and night. In the letter to the second-time customer in *Yūjo anmon*, there are several references to the 'inexplicable bond' (*fushigi no go-enishi* ふしきの御えにし) between the *yūjo* and the customer.[41] A similar expression (*fushigi no go-en* ふしきの御えん) appears in the first section of Taki's letter (line 13), that I have translated as 'bound by a mysterious fate'. Although more research is needed to say anything with certainty about Taki's assistant, they must at least have been aquainted with some of the conventions of the genre.

Not only the contents, but also the intentions expressed by the physical quality of 'love letters' mattered. Taki's assistant writes with much more confidence and fluency of the brush than most of Blomhoff's correspondents from Maruyama. Watanuki Toyoaki in his study of Edo period love letters refers to the practice of *yūjo* borrowing someone else's writing skills especially for the standard parts, although writing in one's own hand, however bad, also seems to have had its charm for its directness.[42] Such sensibilities would have little meaning for those who could not read Japanese, but we may consider it a matter of respect that Taki selected someone reasonably fluent in the epistolary style that befitted the situation had Siebold been a literate Japanese man. Length, however, also spoke to the imagination. Watanuki describes an instance of men comparing the length of the love letters they received, and sex workers writing exorbitantly long letters are depicted in woodblock prints.[43] If Siebold had joined the letter-comparing game, he would have been champion. Yet we could also say that Siebold competed in a different category. Taki's letter was not simply the

[38] Katagiri, *Dejima Yūjo to Oranda Tsūshi*, 66–68. Nationaal Archief, 2.21.005.37 Inventaris van het archief van J. Cock Blomhoff, Nr. 14 'Japanse stukken'. These letters are thus in the correct archive but named 'Japanese pieces' instead of 'letters' (that only seems to apply only to letters written in Dutch).
[39] Katagiri, 83.
[40] Katagiri, 95; Katagiri, 99. Transcriptions in this paragraph are given as in the original letters, in *kana* currently in use.
[41] I am here indebted to Helen Magowan. More details on *Yūjo anmon*, including Magowan's diplomatic transcription and translation of the 'letter to a second-time customer' can be found in her dissertation *Reading the Lines: Edo period* nyohitsu *and the construction of meaning through script form* (2024).
[42] Watanuki, *Edo No Koibumi*, 162.
[43] Watanuki, 172. As for example depicted in Utamaro's 'The Hour of the Dog' from the set *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (c. 1794-5). See Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty*, 129–31.

'everyday work of a *yūjo*' but also contains many communications of a social and practical nature arising from 'family separation'.

As Ine grew up, she became the one writing letters on her mothers' behalf. Different from her mother, Ine received the education of a well-to-do girl, and more. Taki had her enrolled in classes for 'various arts' from age seven or eight[44] which we can assume included feminine accomplishments such as playing the koto or shamisen, and literacy education. Taki and Ine's stepfather may have imagined Ine to go into service in a good household and marry well, as was generally the goal of such education.[45] When Siebold came to Japan for the second time, from 1859 to 1862, Ine corresponded with her biological father in Dutch, that she had learned from Rangaku scholars. Ishiyama Yoshikazu and Kaji Teruyuki, based on previous research, suggest that two letters in Japanese from Taki to Siebold (1859 and 1861) were also written by Ine.[46] Whereas the first letter is written in an experienced '*mairase sōrōbun* style', the second one consists of a mix of *kanji* and *katakana* associated with educated men. If the claims are true, the letters thus reflect Ine's ability to navigate several (epistolary) languages.[47]

Closing Words

Taki's letter is a unique manuscript with more potential than a side-note in the historical research on Siebold. The letter gives us a glimpse of her situation from her own perspective, and placed within the context of surrounding letters, shows us how she navigated a correspondence complicated by limited literacy, language barriers and gendered conventions. While Taki's situation is of course unique, the letter shows how women's literacy beyond the printed models and the erudite could work as a collective endeavour, and draws attention to the hardly addressed literacies of late Edo period women who wrote 'love letters' as part of their job.

Women's literacies in early modern Japan cannot be judged based on the standards of *sōrōbun* and modern Japanese. Rubinger's *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* illustrates the literacy of (rural) commoner women with an appeal to the daimyo by a young

[44] According to Taki's letter from April (?) 1861. Ishiyama and Kaji, *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei*, 210. See also Nakamura, "Kusumoto Ine (1827–1903)," 253.

[45] Where and by whom Ine was taught is unknown, but the education of commoner children and especially girls in writing-schools or *terakoya* in Nagasaki seems to have gotten momentum in the Tenpō period (1830-1844). Shirosuke Masuda, "Terakoya Kiseki-Ken Ni Tsuite," *Nagasaki Daigaku Kyōiku Gakubu Kyōiku Gakka Kenkyū Hōkoku* 34 (1987): 21–25. The first *terakoya* in Nagasaki was erected in 1805 and only attended by boys. Twenty-two other schools were established in or after the 1830s, of which a large majority also only taught boys. In 1830, a large *terakoya* started operation in Kogawamachi (near current Sakuramachi), where over 150 girls (and 350 boys) at a time were enrolled. The Hōsanken (erected in 1848) also accepted girls, although only about thirty against 110 boys. The enrolment details of a number of *terakoya* are unclear.

[46] Ishiyama and Kaji, *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei*, 136. Ishiyama and Kaji, 216.

[47] At the *terakoya*, Ine would have learned to write letters in the female epistolary style, appropriate to her gender, while she later studied and worked with male physicians. To write a letter from her mother to her father in neither of her parent's languages, but in the language associated with her typically 'male' profession, would be an interesting choice. Not only does it stress her independence but also confirms through epistolary style her 'gender non-conformity' discussed in the letter. The letter tells us that Ine was not interested in typical girl's things and that she 'since age six, seven had the temperament of a boy and liked to play with boys' (*Oine goto roku, nana sai ni narishi ni, kokoro sama ooshiku, yūgi ni mo danshi no gotoku* お稲事六七才ニナリシニ心サマ男々シク遊戯ニモ男子ノ如ク) (Ishiyama and Kaji, *Shiiboruto Shokan Shūsei*, 210.).

maidservant. The epistle displays an 'imperfect use of the standard epistolary form' (*sōrōbun*) and uses *kana* for 'simple vocabulary that called for Chinese characters, such as year (*nen*), mountain (*yama*) and afternoon (*hiru*)', while most place names and personal names are written in Chinese characters.[48] Although the mentioned three characters are currently taught in the first two years of elementary school, the 'elementary' characters taught to children in the late Edo period consisted respectively of numbers, (local) placenames, (local) personal names, and characters related to the young student's household occupation, regardless of difficulty.[49] Yakuwa Tomohiro (Rubinger's source) moreover observes that in contrast to the maidservant's limited use of Chinese characters and awkward *sōrōbun* grammar, her brushwork is confident and does not stagnate.[50] A simple explanation may be that the training of this young woman consisted of copying the above-mentioned word-lists and letter models associated with her gender, and not in creating original texts, let alone in this particular genre.[51] As this article shows, women's (private) letters, the genre in which women were most likely to express themselves, were per definition written in a *kana*-based epistolary style. We should thus differentiate gendered epistolary styles, detach 'literacy' from modern standards and consider the writer's relationship to the genre in which they are writing.

Finally, education level and the ability to navigate the social and narrative dimensions of (letter) writing are not the same thing. The maidservant presents herself in the way the authorities liked to see her kind, namely as a filial and hard-working daughter undeterred by numerous setbacks, apart from the latest maltreatments that lead her to ask for annulment of her contract. 'Hard-working' does not mean 'study' in her case. Similarly, Taki borrowing someone else's hand need not just be an emergency solution sought by a pining woman clueless about her position and the meaning of letters but involved having herself properly portrayed as the *yūjo* Sonogi in the role of wife and mother, with the help of substitutes.

[48] Rubinger, 159.
[49] Yoshinaga Koizumi, "Learning to Read and Write - A Study of Tenaraibon," in *Listen, Copy, Read*, ed. Matthias Hayek and Annick Horiuchi (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 100.
[50] Tomohiro Yakuwa, "Kinsei Echigo No Minshū to Moji Manabi," in *Bakumatsu Ishin to Minshū Shakai*, ed. Tsunehisa Abe and Michio Aoki (Koshi Shoin, 1998), 128.
[51] This is based on an observation made by Professor Yokoyama Yuriko, who told me she encountered letters by *yūjo* with an impeccable beginning but a sudden drop in writing skill when communications went beyond the standard themes of letter-models.

Figure captions

Fig. 1
Detail of Taki's first letter showing the name of the sender (Sonogi 其扇) and addressee (Shiiboruto-*sama* シイホルト様).
Leiden University Libraries, BPL 2186 M8

Fig. 2
Detail of Taki's first letter, first section.
Leiden University Libraries, BPL 2186 M8

Fig. 3
Examples of ligatures in Taki's letter: *kashiku* fully reading *medetaku kashiku* めて度かしく (left) and *mairase sōrō* まいらせ候 preceded by *inori* いのり (an inflection of the verb 'pray' or 'wish').

Fig. 4
First part of the translation of Siebold's letter from March 4, 1830.
Siebold-Archiv Burg Brandenstein, Bnd. 26, 102a

Fig. 5
Letter from Siebold to Kusumoto Taki, dated December 23, 1830.
Siebold-Archiv Burg Brandenstein, Bnd. 26, 104

Fig. 6
First part of the translation of Siebold's letter from December 23, 1830.
Siebold-Archiv Burg Brandenstein, Bnd. 26, 103

Fig. 7

The first part of Taki's second letter from November 27, 1831.

Tōyō bunko, no. XVII-1-B-6-183. This image is based a photostat donated to Tōyō bunko by the *Nichi-doku bunka-kyōkai* 日獨文化協會 (Japanese-German Cultural Society) in 1936. The whereabouts of the original letter are currently unknown.

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Appendix

Taki's letter has been included in the recently published collection of Siebold's correspondence *Shiiboruto shokan shūsei* (2023). However, this work only introduces an interpretative transcription, in which grammatical elements have been added and *kana* are replaced by Chinese characters.[52] Although this is a common practice aimed to improve legibility of premodern sources, it is also a form of 'domestication' that tucks part of the text's characteristics back into the folder 'Japanese text samples'. The appendix to this article thus gives a diplomatic transcription of the letter for those interested in further study of late Edo period women's letters.

Notes on the transcription:

1. The text used for this transcription is 'Letter from Kusumoto Taki (1807-1869) to Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796-1866)'. Leiden University Libraries, call. no. BPL 2186 M8. (http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:2010675)
2. Line breaks and voicing marks (*dakuten* 濁点) are as in the original.
3. No punctuation marks and diacritic marks were added.
4. Traditional Chinese characters (*kyūji* 旧字) have been replaced with modern characters (*shinji* 新字). Variant forms of Chinese characters (*itaiji* 異体字) have been replaced by regular, commonly used characters.
5. The transcription employs the standard modernized variants of *hiragana* (one variant for each *kana*). This also applies to the variants of the syllables ミ（み）ニ（に） and ハ（は） that look like *katakana*. The *kana* ゑ has been kept as such. ／ ＼ stand for the *odoriji* 踊り字 used in vertical script to indicate that the preceding two (or more) syllables are to be repeated.

三月四日同七日同十四日三度
御手紙相とゝきありかたく
存上まいらせ候ます／＼御きけん
よろしく御くらし遊はし
候だん承り御めて度存上
まいらせ候このかたわたくし

[52] This interpretative transcription in *Shiiboruto shokan shūsei* is taken over from van Ewijk, "1830 Nen 12 Gatsu, Kikoku Shita Shiiboruto e Sonogi Ga Okutta Saisho No Tegami." The diplomatic transcription introduced here is a slightly revised version of the diplomatic transcription that was also introduced in this article.

おいね事もぶしにくらし
まいらせ候御せんちうもいかゝと
あんじくらし候所御とゞ
こふりなく御つき遊はし
候だんまづ/ \あんしん
いたしまいらせ候ま事に/ \
ふしきの御ゑんにてすねん
らい御なしみに相成
い候所このほうにてだん/ \
御しんぱい事御でき
遊はし候所に昨年は御かへり
になりま事に/ \なみだ
でぬ日とてはこれなく候
又このせつはこま/ \との御ふみ
下され御かをゝ見候こゝち
にて御ゆかしくかぎり
のふそんじ上まいらせ候もはや御かをゝ
見る事もならすとそんじ
候へは御てかみをあなたさまとそんじ
日々とわするゝひまとては
御ざなく候そのうへおいね
事なに事もわかりい
日々とあなたさまの事ばかり
たつね申し候てなか/ \
わたくしにもおもひをこがし
まいらせ候又あそんの事を
日々とわたくしたつね
かた/ \おもひをまし
申候御すいりう下さるへく候
尚又御申こしの事は

けして一日にてもぼうきやく
いたし不申候わたくし
おいね事けして御こゝろに
御かけ下されましくをぢ
どのかたへまいりい申につき
御あんしん下さるへく候
かならず／＼御こゝろに
御かけ御いたみなきよう
御くらし下され度これのみ
いのりまいらせ候あなたさま
御あんじのとふりこのかた
にても日々とあんじくらし
いかゝの御ゑんにてかように
相成候やらとま事にそれ
のみあんじくらしまいらせ候
このかたの事は御こゝろに御かけ
下されましく御いたみ
等出ぬよふ御くらし下され度
ひとへに／＼いのりまいらせ候
そのほか御申こしの御事
御ありかたく存まいらせ候かしこ
まり入居申候
一御母さま御たつしやにて
御くらし遊はし候よし御めて度
存上まいらせ候よろしく御つたへ
下され度御たのみ申上候
すねんらいの事にてさぞ／＼
御あんし遊はし候わんと
それのみ存まいらせ候
一御こゝろに御かけ下され候て

かず/ \ 御おくりもの下
され御ありかたくうけ
とりまいらせ候だん/ \ 御こゝろに
御かけ下され候てゑん
ごく御おくり下され
御をんのほといつしか
わすれ申さず候銀十〆目も
たしかにうけとり申候
ま事に/ \ うみやまかけ
へだゝり候所かよふに
なし下され候事一しやう
わすれ不申候このだん
あつく御礼申上候
一御申付之事けしてわすれ
申さす候しうし事
のとふりにてはよろし
からずとそんし上まいらせ候
けしてわすれ候事にては
御さなく候
一母さまへはなたはこ入壱
さしあけ申候これは
おいね壱人のゑずかき
しるし御ざ候を御あけ
下さるへく候ま事においねに
生うつしに御ざ候この
たん御申あけ下さるべく候
一あなたさまへはなたはこ入
壱さしあけ申候これは
わたくしおいね両人の
すがたかきしるし御ざ候

これ又両人のかを生う
つしに御さ候これを
わたくしおいねとおぼし
めしあさゆふ御らん
下され度御たのみ申上まいらせ候
一あそんもふしにくらし
申候よし又しやくも
なをり候よしめて度存まいらせ候
よろしく御つたへ下さる
へく候同人へたばこ二十まき
引すり壱せつた壱そく
たはこ入壱おくり申候
ま事にみやけの印まて
にて御さ候
一ひがとへんもふしにくらし
申候よしこれまたよろ
しく御つたへ下さるへく候
一そのほか御みやけもの等
おくり候はづにて御さ候へとも
何事もゆきとゝき不申
それゆへ御ぶさた申上候わん
御ゆるし下さるへく候
みきのだん申上度また / \
明年の御たよりを月ほしと
御まち申上まいらせ候かならす / \
御ひようき等出ぬよう
御くらし下さるへく候このほう
にてもあけくれあなたさまの
そく才ゑんめいをいのり
申候よりほか御ざなく候

とふぞや / \ 明年は又々
ちらとにても御たより
下され度ひとへに / \ 御まち
申上まいらせ候御申上度御事
やふ / \ 御ざ候へともまたの
御たよりとおしき筆
とめまいらせ候まつはあら / \
めて度かしく

寅十一月十一日　　其扇
シイホルト様

かへす / \ も御痛みなきよう
御たつしやにて御くらし
下され度御たのみ申上まいらせ候
このほうもふしにくらし
申まゝ御こゝろやすく
おほしめし下さるへく候
一御おくり下され候しな
十三反の内十反うけとり
申候三反はうけとり不申候
又そのうちすこしにても
御おくり下され候しな御ざ
候はゝしかと遊はし
御おくり下さるへく候この
たん御頼申上置候尚又
くわしき事はゑかき
さまへ申上おき候まゝ御きゝ
下さるへく候だん / \
御せわにも成申候まゝ御礼御申

下さるへく候且又直之助さま
りよふ才さまあつき御せわ
になり申まゝ明年の
御たよりにはよろしく
御礼御申こし下さるへく候
かしく

又申上候このせつ御おくり
下され候しなゆびぬき
七つかみたて三つべつ
かうくし壱ゆびかね
十を御ありかたくうけ
とり申候このだんかき
そへ申上まいらせ候