

2 pens are better than 1

Tokyo couple share careers as prolific authors

By Tom Baker

Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

Sometimes nothing is something. According to *Designing with Kanji*, a new book by Tokyo authors Shogo Oketani and Leza Lowitz, the kanji character for nothing, with the on-yomi pronunciation of mu, is "a very profound Zen expression meaning 'nothingness' (or)... 'the original cosmos beyond existence or nonexistence.'"

Oketani and Lowitz's joint explorations of such cultural concepts recently led the couple to an event that involved plenty of nothing: an unpublished manuscript, an absent poet and an unseen city.

The event was an award ceremony earlier this month in New York, at which the two received the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature from the Donald Keene Center for Japanese Culture at Columbia University. The two were honored for their unpublished translation of *America and Other Poems* by Nobuo Ayukawa (1920-1986). It was the first time the prize, established in 1979, ever went to an unpublished manuscript.

"Ayukawa had never been to America," Oketani told The Daily Yomiuri in an e-mail, "but his seminal poem 'America' is considered one of most important post-war Japanese poems. America was the country that had defeated the fascism of World War II Japan. But Ayukawa knew that accepting the freedom brought by America didn't mean that Japan had gained true freedom. The young poets of the defeated country thought that the Japanese had to find their own 'New Land.' Their own America. The critic Takaaki Yoshimoto wrote that Ayukawa was the only Japanese who could talk vividly about New York, describing how the people there lived, what they said, ate, and did.

"So it was Ayukawa's spirit in the other world that probably most enjoyed this wonderful award and ceremony in New York."

The prize comes with a \$5,000 purse, which Oketani and Lowitz split with cowinner Charles Inouye, who translated *Japanese Gothic Tales* by Izumi Kyoka, Volume Two.

Not only are the couple ace translators of poetry, they are also poets in their own right. Oketani wrote a book of poetry called *Cold River*, while Lowitz has two volumes of verse to her name: *Old Ways to Fold New Paper* and *Yoga Poems: Lines to Unfold by*.

Beyond poetry, Lowitz cowrote the screenplay to a short film called *Milk* and is now editing a forthcoming condensation of the journals of Donald Richie. Oketani's other work includes writing historical novels and translating a book on Web design from English into Japanese.

Rediscovering the appeal of kanji

Their most recently published project, *Designing with Kanji*, from Stone Bridge Press, has both their names on the cover, but Lowitz described it as "Shogo's baby."

"He pretty much wrote and researched the whole book, and then I just helped him shape it," she said of their breezy and unconventional, yet highly informative, guide to culturally significant kanji characters. "He was kind of the pilot and I was kind of the copilot."

Written partly as a response to horror stories



The Daily Yomiuri

Leza Lowitz and Shogo Oketani

about Westerners getting kanji tattoos without understanding the meanings, the book explains the best ways to express concepts like justice, energy, pride, happiness, courage, truth, tranquillity and love. It also includes abstract concepts from Buddhist theology and discusses the connotations of concrete images from the natural world, such as animal names.

It is loaded with interesting trivia, such as that dogs were once trained for ninja work and that in a 1972 concert John Lennon wore a helmet, apparently obtained from a Japanese student protester, with the characters "hangyaku" (rebel) painted on it.

Designing with Kanji is not a textbook, but would serve as an excellent supplement to one. Browsing through it should be enough to revive the interest of English speakers whose study of kanji has been on the back burner a little too long.

In an interview together with his wife at Sun and Moon Yoga Studio, which the couple runs in Meguro, Tokyo, Oketani said working on the book

heightened his own appreciation of kanji. "I am Japanese and I studied kanji in school," he said, "(but in writing the book) I've found that kanji are very logical ideograms."

He found that kanji always offer visual clues to their identity—"some metaphor of the meaning or (shape) or thought or pronunciation," he said. "Now I understand why Japanese adopted kanji in the fourth century (and also why) Koreans and Vietnamese used kanji... Kanji is a kind of universal ideogram in Asia."

Some of the book's tidbits of etymology are surprising. For instance, it is only by coincidence that the character for courage, with the kun-yomi pronunciation of isamu, suggests manliness. Even though its shape closely resembles that of the kanji for man, with the kun-yomi pronunciation of otoko, it has a separate origin in a combination of two characters that suggest a "blossoming" of "strength."

One especially fascinating word history is that of chigiri, "the old Japanese term for sexual intercourse," which the book says "appears often in the 11th-century Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji* to describe the shining prince's exploits."

The character for chigiri contains an element meaning "sword," which reflects its ancient origin as a term describing a situation in which one person claimed ownership of another by branding or scarring the slave's head. Over the centuries it came to mean a marriage contract, and then evolved into an "elegant literary term for 'sex.'"

Oketani called this the "most beautiful" of the character's modern uses, despite its history, adding, "I don't think the Japanese who use this term for sex know the real (original) meaning."

According to the book, "Use of this word (today) carries the nuance that a couple who had a past life connection have reunited in this lifetime with the promise of love and sexual bliss."

14th-century connections

Lowitz suggested this concept was at work in her and her husband's own lives. "We have a spiritual guide in America," she said. "She told us that in a past life (in Japan around the 14th century) we were gay men. And we were lovers. And that we were actors...and we just had this great fun time together."

Oketani has returned to the 14th century recently, via research for a novel with the working title *Masara*. He said the main character is a "completely eccentric" samurai named Sasaki Doyo, a real person who was a patron of noh actors, a lowly group at the time.

Doyo was emblematic of one aspect of his cultural moment, a time when Oketani said samurai chafing under the rule of the weakening Kamakura shogunate made political statements through fashion statements. They dressed in bright red kimono and other "weird styles. For example, they had huge umbrellas... (and) crazy hair," he said.

Masara is not his first foray into historical fiction. "We just actually finished a novel together," Lowitz said, referring to *Pavilion of the Wind*, a tale of a female ninja that the couple hopes to publish after finding an illustrator for it.

They both called collaborative writing hard but worthwhile work. "Some (couples) in America finish each other's sentences," Lowitz said. "We finish each other's books."