

The Garden of Shidarezakura and Japanese Poems

The Mori Memorial Foundation, Institute for Urban Development

Researcher: Keiji Wakimoto

A metropolitan city often believed to have meager amounts of greenery, but as a matter of fact there are various parks and green areas in Tokyo. The North wind is cold during winter and not so many people go to parks. When warm sunny days of March come many people begin to focus on cherry trees. As Cherry blossoms are featured in the news as frequently as the temperature rises, it makes many people want to start going to the park.

The Japan Meteorological Agency announced the flowering of Tokyo cherry blossoms on March 23. According to a *Tokyo Walker plus* ranking the popular cherry blossom viewing spots of the country(March 27), 1st Meguro River, 2nd Rikugien, 3rd Ueno Park, 4th Sumida park, 5th Roppongi Hills Mori garden/Sakurazaka. In recent years the Meguro River has attracted attention because riverside cherry trees are so wonderful, but other viewing spots are well-known parks of Tokyo. Ueno Park was planted with cherry trees in the early days of the Edo period (1600s) when Kan'ei-ji temple was constructed. Sumida Park dating back to the Shogun Yoshimune was planted with cherry trees in the 1700s. Both places have a long history of cherry blossom viewing. Roppongi Hills is a recent development, but greenery is taken seriously and many cherry trees have been planted and lit up in the evening. Rikugien which became the most popular among parks, gathers so many Sakura spectators year by year that I would like to write about it.

Rikugien has a huge weeping cherry tree, Shidarezakura, the height is approximately 15m, width 20m, the whole body of large trees is capped with a thin pink flowers. Unlike Somei-yoshino cherry trees the tree spreads branches much more gracefully. You might feel dignity and the sublime, when looking at the wonderful cherry blossoms. It may be said to be a stunning work of art. In the evening, cherry flowers emerge in the darkness; the figure will be as beautiful as it is breathtaking. As the color of the sky changes, many people with cameras in their hands gather around the cherry tree and take tons of photos.

If you missed the Sakura season, Rikugien is still a worth spot to visit. Rikugien is built in 1702 by Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu who served in an important post of the Shogunate of the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi of the Edo period. Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, while a politician, was a man of culture who had deep knowledge in Japanese poetry, *waka*. The name of Rikugien is derived from the six categories of wakas that Ki no Tsurayuki wrote in

the introduction of *Kokin Wakashū* (905), which he compiled. Rikugien is a very beautiful garden and also a very rare garden, a so-called theme park of poetry. The basic structure is same of many Daimyoteien of the Edo period, arranged with a pond in the center of the site that you can tour around it. Yanagisawa created his garden based on various “utamakura” expressions, which were widely used in wakas to represent historic sites and famous places. Many of those utamakuras were from Wakanoura of Wakayama prefecture. Wakanoura is the scenic place which is also a sacred place of waka, where many poems are sung after *Man'yōshū* (7-8 century), and God of waka, Tamatsushima Shrine is enshrined. Yanagisawa chose the “hachijyu hakkyo(八十八境),” eighty eight words from famous wakas, which fits the newly built garden and made stone pillars of eighty eight words. They are all beautiful Japanese poetic words.

This technique of making a garden is called *mitate*, which symbolize Japanese culture uniquely. A motif is expressed by a metaphor in a Japanese garden, utilizing the features of the miniature hill, the garden rock, the bridge and the trees. If it were in the case of Italian or French garden, the motif would be reproduced entirely in its original modeling. For example a part of pond is named “deshionominato(出汐湊)” and small island is named “imoseyama(妹背山),” both are words of wakas sung at Wakanoura. Deshionominato literally means a harbor where a boat is waiting for a high tide to dock and this word also has a connotation of moonrise; waiting for rise of full moon. The rise of full moon is a motif that has been favored in the Japanese literature. Imoseyama means a mountain of two peaks; one is a sister and another is a brother, or wife and husband, cited many famous wakas as an utamakura. Of course imoseyama is a name of small island of Wakanoura, it is also known as a famous title of a masterpiece of Bunraku and Kabuki, *Imoseyama Onna Teikin*.

Mitate deepens one scene with plural meanings and shows hints of history and literature behind it. Eighty eight words, hachijyu hakkyo, are just like catalyst which connects us with an intention of Yanagisawa and the heart of poems beyond time and space and makes beautiful scenes. Most of the traditional Japanese garden is made according with mitate, but in many cases mitate is used only in a part of the garden. No garden is presumed to be designed as thoroughly as Rikugien. If you were born in Wakayama, or had visited Wakanoura before, you would be even more impressed.

Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu made the Kano school's painter draw a completed Rikugien, and presented them to Reigen Jōkō, retired Emperor. Jōkō himself selected the views of the Rikugien, and made court nobles compose wakas, and bestowed that on Yanagisawa in 1706 as for a return. It was a very high honor for Yanagisawa to be vouchsafed the wakas from the Jōkō. Because Reigen Jōkō has been very excellent in waka and calligraphy, the fame of Rikugien became known widely. According to the official record, Shogun Tsunayoshi,

Ienobu, Yoshimune and many important people visited Rikugien so many times.

After the Meiji Restoration, Iwasaki Yatarō, founder of Mitsubishi, purchased Rikugien. Iwasaki family has restored the garden and donated Rikugien to the city of Tokyo in 1938. Rikugien opened to the public in the same year. Fortunately Rikugien has not damaged by The Great Kantō earthquake (1923), but suffered a little by the Tokyo air raid (1945). In 1953 Rikugien was designated by a national special scenic spot. These days Rikugien has been lit up in spring, Sakura season, and in fall, during the autumn leaves season. The night view of Rikugien is gorgeous and awesome but it is also quite interesting to walk around the garden reading the motif words in the daytime.



Lit up Shidarezakura with many spectators and many cameras



One of the stone pillars of “hachijyu hakkyo(八十八境)”



"Deshionominato(出汐湊)": a harbor where a boat is waiting for a high tide to dock



"Imoseyama(妹背山)": a name of island of Wakanoura, also famous utamakura



"Mizuwakeishi(水分石)": a stone which divides a water; mitate of water head of Kinokawa River of Wakayama



If the condition permits you can hope Mt. Fuji and Mt. Tsukuba at "Fujishiro-tōge(藤代峠)" (Fujishiro pass). Fujishiro comes from famous utamakura of Wakayama and it is also a name of Shrine of Kumano Kodo.