

BAMBOO

NICK TARANSKY



Japanese Rods and Rod Makers

My May–June 2012 trip to Japan was a truly inspirational experience. Elsewhere in this issue, I've written about flyfishing Japanese streams but here I'll focus on the Japanese bamboo rod makers I met and their exquisite work.

My initial interest in visiting Japan came from a series of articles by Tomonori 'Bill' Higashi, which appeared in the Japan's own *FlyFisher* magazine several years ago. Titled 'Labor of Love', these stories focused on some leading Japanese rod makers and their creations. Subsequently, I corresponded with Higashi-san and planned a visit; both for some fishing and to meet several of these Japanese craftsmen.

I ended up learning enough to write a book (which I plan to do!) However, I hope that in this column I can at least offer some general reflections on Japanese rod making, as well being a bit more specific about several makers and their rods.

From the outset, a welcome general observation was how widely used bamboo fly rods are in Japan. Bamboo rods are definitely not seen as a niche market, boutique or quaint in any way. As in many Asian countries, bamboo is a very common material in Japan, with many diverse uses, including building/ construction, furniture, cooking/eating utensils, tools, food (bamboo shoots), ornamental planting, erosion control, and a huge number of other applications.

Bamboo also has great cultural and spiritual significance, with its characteristics symbolising flexibility, longevity and endurance.

So bamboo in Japan is both commonplace and very special. The fact that it is used by choice as a rod making material is partly a reflection on its availability, but mostly because bamboo has been proven to produce rods unrivalled in performance for Japanese stream fishing.

Before my visit, I was already aware that, as in the West, Chinese Tonkin Cane (*Arundinaria amabilis*) is well established as a rod making material. I had also read that the softer, lower modulus Japanese Madake bamboo (*Phyllostachys bambusoides*) was used in making their rods too. As it turned out, I was to learn on my visit that this is only the start of the story, and several Japanese makers are working with a range of other indigenous bamboos.

Another interesting point relates to the preferred action of most Japanese rods. Because of the complex braided currents on most Japanese streams, a huge amount of importance is placed on slack line presentations and drag-free drifts, while maintaining accurate placement of the fly. This is often achieved using very long (over 20 feet) leaders, and a range of specific casts and mends. The best style of rod for this application has an action that would be considered very soft and slow in the West. Full flexing rods in 3 or 4 weight, in lengths from 7 to 8 feet are the most common choice.

Many Japanese rods seem to have evolved from the legendary rod tapers of the American master, Paul Young. 'Paul Young Perfectionist' was a phrase that I heard over and over again, being a taper that many makers used as a starting point in their development of rods to suit Japanese conditions. It was fascinating to cast these rods. Many retained the essence of that smooth, silky but deceptively powerful Paul Young action, yet they also had their own character, with an even deeper and more fluid feel. Properly cast, they were far from being 'noodles'. Smoothly loaded, these rods were all capable of high line speed and a range of loop sizes. And equally importantly, after the cast, the soft action and slight weight was ideal for a range of mending techniques.

For me, these Japanese tapers were intriguing. For those accustomed to stiffer, faster rods, they could take some getting used to and may not be to everyone's tastes. Still, I'm looking forward to experimenting with this style of rod over the coming season in the Snowy Mountains, in particular on moderately tight waters and in strong winds.

It was no surprise that aesthetically, the Japanese rods I saw were balanced in overall look and exquisitely finished, but with an emphasis on function and understated elegance. Some rods were reminiscent of classic American finishing, while others had a uniquely Japanese look to them. The Japanese culture of hard work and attention to detail, coupled with simplicity, was evident in the craftsmanship. It was exhilarating to watch these highly skilled artisans at work. They all shared a careful, un rushed approach, with total immersion in the task at hand. Anyone who has read 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' will understand the one word description for this: quality. Although their attitude reflected a pride and respect for workmanship, the rod makers were all very humble about their skills.

A few makers spoke some English, but others virtually none.

Spending a year learning Japanese before my visit really helped to connect with these guys, but Higashi-san (who's English is arguably better than mine!) was an invaluable interpreter. Most makers have websites (which I have listed), and although these are generally in Japanese, the pictures alone (with some help from Google translate) make these sites well worth a visit.

With these general observations in mind, here are some of the master craftspeople that I met, and some specific reflections on their work.

Kazuaki Kikuchi – rod maker

Kikuchi-san is a really lovely guy, very laid back and relaxed. His home and workshop is in the town of Morioka, in the Prefecture of Iwate. Interestingly, his rod business is called 'Big Two Hearted River', after the moving Ernest Hemingway story. He is one of the makers we met who is a fan of the Paul Young tapers, particularly the Perfectionist. The rods of his that I cast reflected this. They were smooth and deep loading, but with plenty of reserve power to fish tumbling pocket water, canopied streams or more open waters.

Though he has experimented with Madake bamboo, Kikuchi-san's current rods are made from lightly heat-treated Tonkin Cane. He uses Japanese Hariki ferrules, along with finely knurled reel seat hardware which he makes himself. His rods are finished in hand-





rubbed Tung Oil, revealing a subdued, natural look, and on the ones I saw, accented with golden guide and ferrule wraps and fine black tipping. Reel seat timbers are brown burl, which looks a little like some of the brown mallee I use. His grips are either a cigar or full wells, depending on the model of the rod. The ferrules feature a hexagonal rod section and cork ferrule plug, with a lanyard which matches a hanging loop on the rod bag. His wife makes his rod bags, which also feature a fish motif button.

Kikuchi-san learnt rod making by translating the Garrison book with an English-Japanese dictionary. This is no mean feat – if you've seen the Garrison book, you'll know it can be pretty overwhelming, even in your native language!

Kikuchi-san's website is www.bthr.net

Naoto Shibuya – rod maker

Shibuya-san is a full-on character. Based in the town of Kawatsura in the Akita Prefecture, his family business is in the beautiful (but highly toxic to most) Urushii lacquer. Many people have seen Urushii varnish on black, red, and clear Japanese bowls, cups and chopsticks (don't worry – it's only toxic before it hardens!) In addition to his rod making and Urushii lacquer work, Shibuya-san is a noted flyfishing

author, guide, instructor and tackle designer – he designs hooks and LDL fly lines and leaders. He has also produced three instructional flyfishing DVDs. His rod making and fishing are based on using looong leaders (20 foot plus) and long drag free drifts. Watching him fish is like nothing I've ever seen.

Like Kikuchi-san, he makes rods from powerful Tonkin Cane. He also mentions the Paul Young Perfectionist as a starting point, but as he says, his rods have now evolved a long way from that point. They are 3 and 4 weights, from 7'2" to 7'9". To me they feel like they have the essence of the Perfectionist to them, but are maybe lighter through the tip and with more taper and power into the butt. However, they still have a more continuous feel and action than say, Payne style, 'fast' dry fly rods.

Shibuya-san's rods use custom Japanese Hariki ferrules and reel seat hardware, which he oxidises to a dark finish. The rods are varnished in a warm reddish gold gloss, over mottled flamed cane. The reel seat and bullet-shaped ferrule plug are finished in exquisite Urushii lacquer. The wraps are unique. He uses a gold tinsel thread, but varnishes over them in dark brown/plum Urushii. This results in a colour that blends in with the bamboo, but with faint golden highlights. The grips are a shallow taper and very comfortable full wells.

Shibuya-san's website is www.kawatsura.com

Sao-Naka – rod maker

Sao-Naka-san is a Tokyo based rod maker. He does make split cane rods, but his core profession is making whole culm rods. These are, as the name suggests, whole, fine, culms of bamboo (from species such as Yadake or Arrow Bamboo – *Pseudosasa japonica*), made into multi-section rods. I had envisaged something basic like our old style Rangoon Cane surf rods. Although the principle at the fundamental level is the same, these rods are maybe the most refined and delicate



I have ever seen. This old craft is highly respected in Japan, and the apprenticeship for becoming an established maker is an astonishing 25 years! Sao-Naka-san has been working on his own for 5 years after 25 years under his master, so he has 30 years' experience in his field. The name 'Sao-Naka' itself is recognition of his profession. 'Sao' (or 'Zao'), means 'Fishing Rod', and 'Naka' comes from his original family name.

These whole culm rods are exquisite, and difficult to do justice to in a few paragraphs. From the very start, culm selection is critical, as there is no opportunity to change the taper of a culm through planning or shaping. Additionally many of these rods are formed from many culms, with part of each culm being chosen for one of many sections in the rod – rods may be 8 pieces or more, with sections fitting together like a modern sleeve-ferruled graphite rod.

Some of these rods are made as fly rods, but many are destined to be ultra-light float fishing rods without reels, for tiny carp species, using hooks the equivalent of size 50 or even smaller. The line on these reel-less rods runs through the inside of the rod sections (like the Daiwa 'interline' style rods). The rods can be made to be quite resilient, but apparently the true connoisseur seeks out a rod that is so fine and delicate, it sits on a knife-edge between sublime performance and imminent breakage!

They are finished with Urushii lacquer, applied meticulously with the fingers. Sao-Naka-san speaks no English, but through Higashi-san's translation, it is evident that he is critical of his own work. Lacquer that looks perfect and that his customers rejoice in frustrates him – he tried to show me elements of the finish he is motivated to improve.

Sao-Naka-san was very generous in showing me some of his techniques and tools, and also gave me a whole culm to make into a 7 foot 4 weight on my return to Australia. I am in the process of finishing it now. It's been intriguing to work on. I've had a preliminary cast, and it feels more like a medium-tip action graphite rod than split cane.

It's interesting to note that Sao-Naka-san's rods are in such demand that the rods he showed me were borrowed back from customers. He has nothing in stock. He doesn't have a website or advertise.

Ushu Nakamura – rod maker

Nakamura-san is another amazing character. Well into his eighties, he is into his third career. In early life he was involved in Pachinko – Japanese pinball gambling. After that, he was a champion breeder of Akita dogs. This current chapter of his life sees him as a renowned



and highly respected rod maker, which has been his career since he was sixty.

It was a true honour to meet him – an experience that on its own was worth the trip to Japan. Nakamura-san owns a small tackle store and workshop in the town of Kiryu in Gunma Prefecture. Walking into his store feels in some ways like stepping back into the 1950s, with wooden spools of line and other vintage and collectible tackle. And yet he is a very progressive, leading edge rod maker. After initial greetings, still at the front door of his workshop, he was very keen to show me a sheet with photos of microscopic cross-sections of half a dozen or more species of bamboo he is using and experimenting with in his rod making. These included Tonkin, Madake, Medake, Yadake and others. He makes mainly 6 sided split cane rods, but also whole culm rods and hybrids (half split cane, half whole culm.)

Nakamura-san had many projects and prototypes underway. One factor in his innovation, I think, is the wonderful collaboration



that he has with close neighbor Kenshiro Shimazaki. Shimazaki-san is an icon in Japanese flyfishing. He is a leading fly tier, a hook and tackle designer for Tiemco, and keeps Nakamura-san very busy from what I could see!

I cast a large range of Nakamura-san's rods over the course of an afternoon. They were all amazing, and each unique in their own way. Most were made from Madake and other very low modulus bamboos, so had an amazing fluid feel. He also had a spliced Tonkin Paul Young Midge-based rod, with scarf ferrules, that was as fast and tight as any bamboo you would wish to cast.

The aesthetics of his rods to me are definitively Japanese. Bamboo ferrules, bamboo reel seat, semi blonde lemon bamboo finish, Kanji signing and poetry inscribed on the butt, and golden brass reel seat hardware to blend in with the bamboo. There are clear wraps, guides and tip tops that he makes himself and every other detail comes together into a simple but beautiful rod.

Nakamura-san has no website or email, no advertising or social media presence. All his work is word of mouth, and he is in such demand that he has the luxury of being able to select his customers. I was lucky enough to get on his list, so now I get to experience the other side of what it's like to wait for a rod!

Harada-san – rod maker

Harada-san is an Osaka-based rod maker. I only had the chance to meet him briefly, over dinner, but I had seen photos of his work in Japan *FlyFisher*, and was able to cast two of his recent rods during my visit. Harada-san makes rods for Japanese trout using Madake bamboo. He feels that the supple feel of this material suits the fish and the fishery. The rods I cast were finished beautifully and also cast very smoothly. Because of the low modulus of Madake, he is now using hybrid bamboo (female) and graphite (male) spigot ferrules, to balance the light action, feel and weight of Madake in a responsive, smooth small stream trout rod. He also swells the wood on the reel seat insert to meet the cork grip, so there is a seamless transition from seat to grip. This looked unique and felt very nice too.

Harada-san speaks some English and he spoke beautifully



when we were discussing why we flyfish for trout. He simply said, in perfect, deliberate English, 'I fish for trout, because when I catch a fish, I think that he is me'. He apparently speaks French very well (I'll have to take his word for that!) which explains his business name – 'Le Grand Soir'.

Harada-san's website is www.le-grand-soir.net

Toshiyuki Hariki – Ferrule and Reel seat Hardware Maker

It was on Higashi-san's initial recommendation that, in addition to American CSE ferrules, I have been using Hariki-san's ferrules and reel seat hardware for several years. So it was wonderful to finally meet him. Hariki-san works with his father in their Osaka-based precision engineering family business, making parts for the automotive and other industries. Hariki-san's love of flyfishing lead him to begin



making ferrules and reel seat hardware and these have been very well received, both in Japan and internationally. I hope to review Hariki ferrules and hardware at a later date, but suffice to say, they are in keeping with the level of craftsmanship of the Japanese rod makers who use them.

Hariki-san's website is: www.hariki.com
With an English page at:
www.hariki.com/0802hf_web01.pdf

Kouji Yano – Silk Fly Line Maker

Along with Harada-san and Hariki-san, Yano-san is another Osaka based flyfishing craftsman. With a career and experience in the fine textile industry, Yano-san turned his skills to making silk fly lines. I had the opportunity to cast some (on my own rods and those of Harada-san) during my visit, and they felt really good. He was also very kind in giving me a line to field test here on my return. I am

eagerly awaiting the chance to put it through a full season and review it for the Australian market.

Yano-san's website is at: www.hcn.zaq.ne.jp/yanosilkline

Three weeks was barely enough time to scratch the surface and meet just a few of Japan's fine tackle and rod makers and other artisans. Everyone I met was so generous, humble and friendly. I hope to return many times to renew friendships, make new ones, and to share what I learn in Australia.

Bamboo rod maker Nick Taransky lives in Queanbeyan, near the streams of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains. Visit www.taranskybamboo.com.au