SUGAWARA NO MICHIZANE
845–903

The courtier, poet, and scholar Sugawara no Michizane is considered the most outstanding Japanese poet of Chinese-style poetry. He used this traditional genre for trenchant observations and personal plaint as had no other poet before him.

Michizane came from a family of remarkable scholars, who had served as professors at the State Academy devoted to Chinese studies. Although the Sugawara clan was renowned for Chinese scholarship and Chinese-style poetry, its members had never held the highest offices at court. Alone in his family, Michizane eventually rose from the academy to the second-highest position in the state. Yet the spectacular series of promotions during the reign of Emperor Uda (r. 887–97), who favored Michizane, would eventually exact a heavy price. The powerful Northern branch of the Fujiwara clan regarded his career as a threat. In 886 a purge initiated by the Fujiwara sent Michizane off to a dreary governor post in the provinces, a demotion he deeply resented. But the most damaging hit came in 901, only two weeks after he had received yet another illustrious promotion in rank: on trumped-up charges, Michizane was suddenly banished to a minor post in faraway Kyūshū, the southernmost island of Japan. He died after two sorrowful years in exile, a broken man.

But the passing of the man Michizane was the birth of the god Tenjin. Some twenty years after his death, natural disasters and other inconspicuous events at court were attributed to the wrath of his revengeful spirit. His reputation was rehabilitated and shrines to him in the guise of Tenjin were built to pacify the exiled poet’s spirit. Today, he is revered at thousands of shrines throughout Japan as the god of scholarship (and a divine helping hand to students praying for academic success in the challenging university entrance exams).

Michizane identified strongly with the scholarly tradition of his family, as is evident in the selections in this anthology. Like the Chinese poet Bo Juyi, whom he admired greatly, he compiled his own literary collection, and he offered it to the emperor, together with the literary collections of his father and grandfather. Plum blossoms, Michizane’s emblem and the origin of many legends that grew around him, frame his poetic work. His first poem, “On Looking at the Plum Blossoms on a Moonlit Night,” composed when he was eleven, shows his early training in writing on set topics and crafting parallel couplets, a distinctive feature of Chinese-style poetry. His last poem, “In Exile, Spring Snow,” which also dwells on plum blossoms, shows that Michizane never lost hope of being recalled from exile. To the end he awaited liberation, pointing to famous examples of freed captives in classical Chinese literature, the books that had defined his life and identity.

On “Looking at Plum Blossoms on a Moonlit Night”

Written when I was in my eleventh year. My father had Scholar Shimada test me. That’s when I composed my first Chinese-style poem. Thus I include it as the beginning of my collection.

Moon glints like snow under brightened skies. Plum blossoms seem like radiant stars. Just lovely—this golden mirror turning And in the courtyard the perfume of their jade calyces.

I Stop Practicing the Zither

No doubt: playing zither and reading books is an asset for a true scholar: Under the window of my study rests my seven-stringed zither. Intense concentration shows no effect, in vain do I go over the score. My finger technique is full of mistakes and I have to ask my teacher again and again. In my “Deep Gorges”—no flow of an autumn torrent. And my “Winter Crows” never conveyed the desolation of cries at night. The friends, who “know my tone,” all say that I’m wasting my time for nothing. Well, isn’t my family tradition more in poetry composition?

The Hardships of Professors

My family is not one of generals, With Confucian studies we make our living. My venerable grandfather reached the third court rank And my dear father served as high court noble. They understood the power of studying the past And bequeathed it for their descendants’ glory. The day I was promoted to the status of “advanced student” I eagerly wished to establish myself in our family trade. The year I became professor at the state academy

1. All selections translated by Wiebe Denzceck.
2. In 900, shortly before his exile, the aging Michizane compiled his own poetry collection and offered it up to the reigning Emperor Daigo, together with the collections of his father and grandfather, who had also been prominent scholars and officials. This childhood poem was on a topic assigned for poetry practice by his tutor, Shimada.
3. In China this instrument had been associated with refinement and scholars.
4. Like “Deep Gorges,” a musical piece from the zither repertoire.
5. “The one who knows the tone” became a stock expression for “a close friend.” In a well-known anecdote, the brilliant zither player Bo Ya enjoys playing for his friend Zhong Ziqi, who is the only one who understands his playing and “knows his tone.” After Zhong Ziqi’s death Bo Ya never played his zither again.
6. The title of a student selected to prepare for the civil service examination, given to Michizane at the age of 23 (unusually young).
Luckily our lecture hall was rebuilt. Everybody rushed to extend their congratulations. Only my father was startled. Why was he so startled? "Unfortunately you are our only child!" Certainly, the official rank of a professor is not bad. And a scholar's salary is decent. But I once also held this post. And learnt to be cautious, afraid of human emotions." When I first heard his kind advice. I felt as if stepping on ice, unsure how to proceed. In my fourth year the council decided To have me teach all students. Hardly had I been at the lectern for three days When slanderous rumors reached my ears. This year, when recommending students for advancement, The criteria for pass and fail were real clear. But the first talentless student who failed. Badmouthed me and filed a complaint, demanding unearned promotion. In my teaching there are no shortcomings And in my selection for advancement I was fair. How true! My father's advice. When he warned me before all these happened.

Note on My Library

There is a house in Senpū Ward in the eastern sector of the capital, a corridor in the southwest corner of the house, and a room at the southernmost end of the corridor. The room is hardly more than ten feet square: when setting foot there those entering or leaving have to squeeze past each other and those getting up and sitting down end up on tightly lined mats. Yet out of this room have emerged about a hundred men who passed the "advanced student" and "presented scholar" examinations. That's why scholars regard this room as a "Dragon Gate" of sorts. It goes also by the name of "Mountain Shade Pavilion," because it lies west of a small hill. Near the entrance there is a plum tree and a few steps to the east there are clumps of bamboo. Each time the plum tree is in bloom and the bamboo is touched by the wind it heightens and brightens one's spirits and nourishes one's mind.

When I passed the "advanced student" examination my father said, "This room has a famous reputation. Why not move in here, while you are studying hard for the coming exams?" So I tidied up the room, shifting the blinds and mats around, and moved my books to a safe place. But, oh my, when space conditions are cramped, people get edgy and distressed. Among my friends there are some I feel close to and some I don't know well. Some put on a friendly face, although they have no interest to connect on a deeper level, while others are annoying like some lowborn people but we are on familiar terms. Some claim to seek enlightenment, when they pry among my private books and notes, while others pretend to pay a courtesy call, only to barge in right when I am trying to rest.

Another thing: a brush and a scraper are implements for writing texts and erasing mistakes. But as for that flock of crows which descends on me, they have no idea what these things are used for. They wield the scraper, scratching and damaging the desks, and fiddle around with the brush until they have soiled and spoiled my books. Yet another thing: the foundation for proper study is excerpting and excerpting implies the production of notes. I am by nature not very organized and systematic, so I can't help sometimes stopping my brush (in the middle of study) and leave slips of paper strewn about with excerpted notes. That's when people sneak into my library—hard to know what they are really up to—and the clever ones, when they see the notes, fold them up and tuck them away into their gown, but the stupid ones simply snatch them up, tear them in two and throw them away! These kinds of things annoy me to the extreme, and there are countless other petty annoyances I could go on about.

One more thing. Sometimes a friend comes for some compelling reason on important business and enters the library, whereupon those sneaky intruders, not bothering to find out whether the person who is with me has important business, walk straight in with unimportant trifles. That's what makes me despair! Really, it makes me despair. That Dong Zhongshu let down his curtain and Master Xue climbed over the wall was not only because they wanted to focus on their studies, they also wanted some peace of mind. When writing this piece today I don't mean it to be a treatise on how to break off relations. I simply want to pour out my worries in writing. I am especially ashamed that I did not establish a private academy that would attract talented men, but instead need to establish some rules for unwanted intruders of my library. This is for those who do not understand me, and those who do understand me number about three or so people. I hope that with the small net designed to keep out swallows and sparrows I don't end up driving phoeneixes away.

Written in trepidation on the first day of the seventh month of 893.

Seeing the Plum Blossoms When Sentenced to Exile

When the East Wind blows, send me your fragrance you plum blossoms! With your master gone, don't forget about spring.

2. Figures known for hiding from the throng of followers they attracted. Dong Zhongshu (ca. 179-104 B.C.E.), a leading Confucian thinker during the Han Dynasty, was said to lower the curtains of his room and lecture only to a select group of advanced students, letting them pass their lecture notes on to the beginners. 1. Michizane's most famous vernacular poem. Legend has it that the tree in his garden in Kyoto was so touched by this poem that it flew to be with him in Dazaifu, his place of exile in the south.
In Exile, Spring Snow

They fill the town, overwhelm the district: so many plum blossoms!
Just like blossoms early in the year, rustled by wind in the sunlight.
What I see sticking to the feet of the geese might be letters on cloth
And that, there, the white dots on the head of the crows, makes me
hopeful that I will return home.1

1. Two Chinese allusions that express Michizane’s hopes of returning from exile. A certain
Su Wu, long held by northern tribes, was rescued when a Han emperor happened to shoot
the goose to whose leg he had attached a message; and a prince of the state of Yan, held
hostage by the king of Qin, was told he could return home when crows’ heads turned white
and horses grew horns—improbable events that came to pass, leading to his freedom. This
was Michizane’s last poem.

THE KOKINSHU
ca. 905

The age of The Kokinshū, the period around 900, was a turning point in
Japanese history. Vernacular poetry gained public stature, and vernacular
prose genres such as tales and diaries, which would culminate in The Tale of
Genji and The Pillow Book, started to emerge. The flourishing of vernacular lit-
erature went hand in hand with the development of a new script—the kana
syllabic alphabet, also called “women’s hand”—which complemented the hith-
erto exclusive use of Chinese characters in writing Japanese. Politically, members
of the Fujiwara family, which would dominate the court for the rest of the
Heian Period, increasingly inserted themselves as powerful regents to the emperor,
marrying their daughters into the imperial family.

Japan’s earliest imperial poetry antholo-
gies date from the early ninth century, when Emperor Saga, who was thor-
noughly trained in Chinese Classics and an avid poet himself, commissioned
three anthologies of Chinese-style poetry. Following this tradition, Emperor Daigo
commissioned The Kokinshū (a short form of Kōkanwakashū, “Collection of
Ancient and Modern Waka Poems”), the first anthology of vernacular waka
poetry. The success of this collection helped enshrine the thirty-one-syllable
waka poem (composed in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern) as the dominant form, intended
to represent the splendor of the reigning court.

Compiled by a team headed by Ki no
Tsurayuki (ca. 868–945), a leading fig-
ure of the emerging vernacular literature
(for his biography and his other pioneerin-
work, see his Tosa Diary, excerpted in
this volume), The Kokinshū contains
more than one thousand poems, com-
plete with a vernacular Japanese and a
Chinese-style preface, and is arranged
by topical categories in twenty books.
The books on the four seasons and on
“love” dominate the collection, but there
are also books on topics such as “par-
ing,” “travel,” “mourning,” and “puns
and wordplay.”

The anthology and its books are
arranged according to principles of
association and progression into an
overarching narrative that far exceeds
the meaning of the individual poems.
Sequences of poems with subtle varia-
tions on the same topic are the building
blocks that make the anthology into a
coherent text of its own. For example,
the books on the seasons and on love
lend themselves to a natural cycle of
beginning, high point, and end or the
familiar pattern of first glimpse of the
beloved, courtship, passion, marriage
(or liaison), disillusion, separation, lone-
liness, and despair. The compilers’ abil-
ity to fashion a narrative out of poems
composed by many different authors on
different occasions is often stunning and
would be much imitated. Though the
principles of association and progres-
sion invented by the compilers of
The Kokinshū would become increas-
ingly sophisticated in later poetry
anthologies, these structural devices are
already fully realized in the first impe-
rial anthology, demonstrating that one
of the world’s most compressed genres
can transcend the apparent limitations
of its form.

In contrast to collections such as
The Man’yōshū—Japan’s earliest poetry
anthology, with its tones of archaic
grandeur and simplicity best exemplified
by Hitomaro’s writings—The Ko-
kinshū values poetic elegance, intellec-
tual twists, and erudite refinement. The
contradiction between empirical evi-
dence and conventional knowledge
generates many of the clever conceits
of Kokinshū poetry: a typical strategy is
“elegant confusion,” as when early plum
blossoms at the beginning of spring are
mistakenly interpreted as late snow-
flakes, or vice versa, and the discovery
of the error—or the uncertainty about
the real nature of white stuff on plum
tree branches—becomes the main point
of the poem. In addition to daring visual
metaphor, the waka poetry in The Koki-
shū relies on a variety of rhetorical
figures that drastically condense poetic
expression: “poetic pillows” (tsamakura)
are poetically evocative place-names,
which in the space of a few syllables
summon up a host of associations. An
entire poetic geography of the Japanese
archipelago developed that was based
on these resonant names. “Pivot words”
(kakukotoba) are phonetic puns, in which
a sequence of syllables has two different
meanings. Aided by the new phonetic
kana syllabary, plays on double meaning
apparently increased greatly during the
Kokinshū age, showing a heightened
awareness of the disjunction between
phonetic sound and written character.

At least as influential as its poetry
was Ki no Tsurayuki’s “Japanese Pref-
ace” to The Kokinshū (also called “Kana
Preface,” because it used the vernacular
syllabary). It is the canonical state-
ment on the principles of waka poetry,
grounding it in a universal instinct for
song. Although Ki no Tsurayuki’s view
of poetry ultimately relied on the Chi-
nese Classic of Poetry and its “Great
Preface” (included in Vol. A), he argued
against the traditions of arduous train-
ing and sophisticated craftsmanship
that characterized traditional Chinese-
style poetry, favoring instead a sponta-
neous expression of human imagination.
Originally conceived fairly narrowly as
a polemic against the high status of
Chinese-style poetry and an attempt to
elevate vernacular waka poetry to a
courtly art, Tsurayuki’s statement became
so influential in Japanese culture that
it came to inform broad assumptions
about how humans are moved to create
works of art.