Abstract and Keywords

Sino-Japanese literature stands out among the Chinese-style literatures of East Asia for the wealth of texts preserved from the early period, its complex symbiosis with a flourishing vernacular tradition, and its pervasive reliance on gloss-reading techniques of Chinese texts (kundoku). These techniques allowed the transformation of Chinese texts into Japanese sound, syntax, and morphology and enabled a distinctive linguistic and creative distance from continental literary production. This chapter surveys the literary culture and production of Early Japan (Asuka, Nara and Heian Periods, seventh through twelfth centuries). After introducing the debates about the varied nomenclature of the corpus of “Sino-Japanese Literature” (kanbun; also called Japanese Literature in Chinese), it sketches the contexts of the emergence of Sino-Japanese textual culture and literature in Japan and gives an overview of major texts in their cultural context. It concludes with reflections on what students of China can learn from Sino-Japanese Literature.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese literature, Japanese literature, kanbun, logographic scripts, Nara Period, Heian Period, Sugawara no Michizane, Bai Juyi, Wakan rōeishū, Honchō monzui

Terminologies, Temporalities

ONE dreary autumn night in Kyoto in the early 990s, a soaking-wet messenger from the senior official Fujiwara no Tadanobu bursts into the residence of Empress Teishi with a letter for her lady-in-waiting Sei Shōnagon. “You are there in the flowering capital, beneath the Council Chamber’s brocade curtains—how should this end?” Tadanobu’s attempt to rekindle a cooling affair with Shōnagon through a line the Chinese poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) had written to a friend in Chang’an when exiled to Jiangzhou is a
Early Sino-Japanese Literature

witty provocation. Shonagon certainly knows her Bai Juyi, but as a Heian period (794–1185) woman she is confined to composing in Japanese and cannot simply reply with the “end” of the poem in Chinese. Her ingenious answer gains her Tadanobu’s and the court’s admiration: she seizes a piece of dead charcoal from the brazier and responds in the “woman’s hand” of kana letters: “Who will come visit this grass-thatched hut?” In little more than a dozen syllables she manages four things at once. She proves her knowledge of Bai Juyi’s next line, where the poet sits on a rainy night in his grass-thatched hut beneath Mount Lu; she reproaches Tadanobu for letting their passion die down; she caps a seven-syllable line from a Chinese poem with half a waka poem, in two seven-syllable lines; and when resorting to the piece of charcoal, she brilliantly draws on the material poetics of waka, which combines words with apropos objects. This is Heian court literature at its best. It showcases the intricacies of Japanese literary culture, revealing the place of Chinese learning, literary gender roles, the dynamics between Chinese-style and vernacular idioms, the importance of creative wit, and—with Bai Juyi’s poetry functioning as conversational lexicon—the peculiar reception of Chinese poetry in Japan.

Sino-Japanese literature stands out among the Chinese-style literatures of East Asia for the wealth of texts preserved from the early period (seventh through twelfth centuries), for its complex symbiosis with a flourishing vernacular tradition from its beginnings, and for its pervasive reliance on gloss-reading techniques of Chinese texts (kundoku 訓読; see Chapter 33). These techniques allowed transforming Chinese texts into Japanese sound, syntax, and morphology and enabled a distinctive linguistic and creative distance from continental literary production. Unlike with parts of Korea and Vietnam, which had had complex histories of Chinese colonization and influence since the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Japan’s greater creative distance was encouraged by its insular distance and absence of direct colonization. This had significant cultural consequences: unlike its East Asian neighbors, Japan never instituted a Chinese-style civil service examination system connecting classical learning to government recruitment; it was more generous in its adaptation of Chinese precedent to local sociopolitical conditions and literary and aesthetic values; and its involvement with China happened in the early period predominantly through texts, as very few envoys, students, and monks, apart from traders, actually set foot in China, and even fewer Chinese came to Japan.

We use the term “Sino-Japanese Literature” here (and Chapter 33) to refer to the corpus of literary texts that Japanese wrote in accordance with Chinese syntax between the sixth and twentieth centuries (Wixted 1998). Sino-Japanese was the authoritative written language of government, the Buddhist clergy, scholarship, and refined belles-lettres into the twentieth century. The terminology used to describe this corpus is notoriously thorny and disputed. The word 漢文 (J. kanbun, K. hannun, V. hán văn) came to be used outside of China to refer to both texts written in China and texts produced in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in varieties of Literary Chinese. The modern projection of national and ethnic categories onto linguistic terms, associating a country and nation with one national language, has made it impossible to find a satisfactory translation for the traditional term 漢文. “Literary Chinese” and “Japanese Literature in Chinese” have often been used. Literary Chinese throughout East Asia has also been called “Sinitic” (Mair 1994),
highlighting the artificiality of the written language in contrast to spoken vernaculars. However, all the above terms play up the foreignness of Sino-Japanese texts rather than acknowledging them as central pillars of Japanese premodern cultural history. At the same time, they downplay the degree of stylistic variation and possible hybridization with the local vernacular. “Sino-Japanese” draws attention to local vernacularization processes. Peter Kornicki has argued, most radically, that the term should be reserved for those texts written in Japan that contain so many vernacular elements that the text would be incomprehensible to readers outside Japan (Kornicki 2010). This still introduces an artificial distinction between supposedly “pure” and “abnormal” forms of Literary Chinese, not unlike the modern concept of “deviant” (hentai 变体) kanbun (Minegishi 1986; Rabinovitch 1996).

Linguists call “Sino-Japanese” the lexical layer of Chinese origin in the modern Japanese language, which connects East Asia just as Latinate diction has done for European traditions. But we understand “Sino-Japanese” here as a premodern cultural and literary category. More than other translations of the term kanbun (or kanshibun (p. 553) 漢詩文), “Sino-Japanese Literature” captures the linguistic environment in which its authors were writing (characterized by the dominance of the local vernacular), highlights the hybridity of Japanese literary culture with its strong and long-standing vernacular tradition, and allows for the notion of a “hyphenated spectrum” of styles making texts more “Sino” or “Japanese” based on synchronic factors (genres, occasions, education of the author) and diachronic change (flow of people and texts between Japan and the continent).

In literary contexts, a more elegant solution is “Chinese-style literature,” because it comes close to the transregional word kanbun and allows us to dispense with the cumbersome ethnic hyphenations of “Sino-Japanese,” “Sino-Korean,” and “Sino-Vietnamese.” It also highlights the literary edge of the term, emphasizing stylistic choice over linguistic law. Though convenient, it unduly downplays the physical location of literary production—in linguistic, political, and social terms. In this chapter, we use “Sino-Japanese” and “Chinese-style” literature as best compromises, while being aware that no single term captures the enormous variety of kanbun styles produced throughout premodern Japan and, for that matter, East Asia.

Variability in Sino-Japanese styles was the result of a complex web of factors determined by genre, changes in the sites and actors of literary production, and shifts in Sino-Japanese relations and exchanges with the continent. The codified language of poetry, bound by meter, rhyme, or tonality of each Chinese syllable, kept Sino-Japanese poetry and parallel prose (in four and six syllables) closest to forms of Literary Chinese. However, flexible prose forms absorbed vernacular dimensions more readily, introducing, for example, the rich array of honorific and humble expressions in Japanese that are needed when depicting social interactions between figures of different social status. This resulted in a stronger vernacularization of prose, as with the bureaucratic diary style of Heian courtier diaries (kokiroku 古記録), the nativized plotlines of Buddhist anecdotal
literature, or the mixed Sino-Japanese style (*wakan konkōbun* 和漢混交文) of medieval warrior tales (*gunki monogatari* 軍記物語).

Dramatic sociohistorical changes have shaped the changing stages and actors of Sino-Japanese literature over the past fifteen hundred years. In the ancient (Asuka (592–710), Nara (710–794), and Heian (794–1185)) period, the court was the center of literary production and the “Confucian scholars” (at first many descendants of Korean scribal lineages, then graduates of the State Academy and members of the hereditary scholarly families) produced the bulk of Sino-Japanese literature, nourished by Six Dynasty and Tang textual models. With the medieval period (twelfth through sixteenth centuries) and the emergence of successive shogunates, Zen monks in the monasteries of the “Five Mountain” (*Gozan* 五山) system functioned as ambassadors to China and produced Sinological scholarship and Sino-Japanese literature in a radically different mode, enthusiastically responding to Song and Ming literary models. With the early modern period and the Tokugawa shogunate, Sino-Japanese literary production spread through all classes of society, including commoners, while bringing women authors back into a domain that had been virtually exclusively male since the early Heian period. It reached an unprecedented peak with the promotion of mass schooling and the flourishing of print culture, the thriving of new forms of Confucian ideology and education, and the diversification of genres, topics, and idioms, not least due to the influx of Ming and Qing vernacular fiction. This body of texts, passionately received in Japan, fundamentally changed how Japanese authors viewed China, their own Chinese-style tradition, and their vernacular language and literature.

Although the shifts in the history of Sino-Japanese literature were not as sudden and clear-cut as sketched above, the history of Sino-Japanese literature, if we can even talk of it as a continuous tradition, has been episodic and highly sensitive to transformations in the political system, in patterns of Sino-Japanese exchange, and in the social groups and social occasions that produced Chinese-style writing.

In this chapter, we focus on the ancient period until the twelfth century, because the creative appropriation of Chinese models until the Tang Dynasty dominated Sino-Japanese literature until at least the twelfth century, with Song literary models becoming prominent during the medieval period. For a handbook that ends with the Tang, it makes sense to adopt the waning and transformation of the reception of Tang literature in Japan as the temporal limit for our treatment of Sino-Japanese literature.

**Origins and Contexts**

Unlike Chinese literature, whose history can be told as the triumphant rise of a pioneering civilization, Japanese literature has to start with a story of influence and reception. This is uncomfortable for a modern nation state in search of a unique identity, and even worse because it entails multiple stories of reception. During the formative first
Early Sino-Japanese Literature

millennium CE, varieties of “Chinese” culture of numerous dynasties reached Japan via southern and northern sea routes and through the various states on the Korean peninsula: the Three Kingdoms of Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla and the Confederation of Kaya into the seventh century, and Unified Silla and Parhae, a state covering parts of today’s Manchuria and North Korea, between the seventh and tenth centuries.

It is hard to pinpoint the beginning of writing in Japan, but beginning in the fifth century CE, scribes from the Korean peninsula in the service of Yamato kings, the regional power in the Kinai region of western Japan, produced inscriptions on stone, swords, and bronze mirrors. The recent discovery of tens of thousands of wooden tablets (mokkan 木簡) from the capital areas has given us the precious opportunity to reconstruct the remarkable explosion of literacy during the seventh and eighth centuries. From merchandise labels and writing exercises to snippets of texts testifying to the emerging administrative and literary cultures under strong Buddhist influence, the corpus of the wooden tablets gives exceptional insight into what, how, and why people were writing and reading (Lurie 2011).

Nowhere is the cultural connection between Buddhism and writing more evident than in the hagiographic biographies of Prince Shōtoku 聖徳太子 (574–622), who is credited with the introduction of Buddhism into Japan and with authoring the first longer texts, namely three sutra commentaries and a “Seventeen Article Constitution” that outlines administrative etiquette for the emerging imperial court at Asuka. The tenth-century Shōtoku taishi dennyakusho 聖徳太子伝略 (Abridged Biography of Prince Shōtoku) illustrates the range of literacies that contemporaries considered constitutive of cultural competence. He is a master interpreter of Buddhist scriptures, master author of sutra commentaries, master calligrapher, a host of poetry banquets for envoys, and also a Confucian moral paragon. His mind-boggling precocity in textual matters is explained through the narrative device of reincarnation. As the reincarnation of the Chinese Tiantai Buddhist patriarch Huisi 慧思 (515–577), he is an ideal transmitter of continental knowledge, competent in all its forms, yet destined to found a new textual regime in a fledgling peripheral state.

Complementing archaeological evidence and the narratives in the early Japanese chronicles, Kojiki 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and Nihon shoki 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, 720), the preface to Kaifūsō 懐風藻 (Florilegium of Cherished Airs, 751), Japan’s earliest extant poetry anthology, fleshes out the forces that generated the production of Sino-Japanese poetry on the archipelago. Based in part on the preface to Xiao Tong’s 蕭統 (501–531) Wen xuan 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature), it exploits the multiple meanings of bun 文—pattern, ornament, civilization, writing, texts, Confucian learning—to sketch the rise of Japanese civilization and literature (Denecke 2006).

Starting before the advent of human civilization (jinbun 人文), the preface states that the first texts reached Japan in the form of diplomatic documents from the Korean kingdoms of Paekche and Koguryo, followed by the arrival of Korean teachers who also brought along fundamental texts like the Analects and the Qianzi wen 千字文 (The One Thousand Character Text). But it was Emperor Tenji 天智天皇 (r. 668–671) who established the
custom of composing Sino-Japanese poetry at court banquets for which literati were probably invited over from the newly established State Academy (大学寮 daigakuryō). Tenji promoted learning and literature because he understood that “to shape customs and transform habits nothing is better than literature.” In short, the Kaifūsō preface highlights five successive factors facilitating the emergence of literature: diplomacy, texts (sometimes with teachers attached), court entertainment, the State Academy, and an ideology of “Letters” (bun), a concept which integrates the more specific practices of poetic composition into the broader world of government and civilization (for a survey of the world of Letters and literature in early and medieval Japan, see Kōno et al. 2015).

Diplomacy certainly gave the first writing arriving from the continent value and meaning. As participants in the Chinese tribute sphere, Japanese chieftains received official titles from Chinese dynasties in exchange for vassal status and tribute missions as early as 57 CE. The frequency and significance of missions to China picked up in the seventh century, stimulated by the unrest on the Korean Peninsula during the end of the Three Kingdoms period (first century BCE–668), which saw Paekche’s elite fleeing to Japan during Silla’s conquest and unification of the 660 and 670s. A mere nineteen (or twenty) missions between 607 and 838 were instrumental for establishing the statutory law system (律令 ritsuryō), for the emergence of Tendai (Ch. Tiantai) and Esoteric Buddhist schools in Japan, the transmission of Tang poetry collections and poetics, devotional art, architecture, court music, and more (on the history in particular of the book and of book imports, see Kornicki 1998). The last mission, scheduled for 894, was canceled. A combination of factors has been made responsible for the abandonment of the missions—the dangerous trip, costliness, the instability of the waning Tang Dynasty, and an increasing turn towards domestic matters and native culture.

Endorsed on the stage of East Asian diplomacy, Sino-Japanese poetry found its first domestic uses at the courts of the brothers and emperors Tenji and Tenmu 天武天皇 (r. 672–86) in the later seventh century. Over the next centuries, Sino-Japanese poetry came to structure everyday court life. There were annual festivals adopted from Chinese custom that featured poetry composition, such as the “Winding Stream Festival” (曲水 kyokusui) on the third day of the third month, “Tanabata” or the yearly encounter between the Weaver Maid and the Cowherd on the seventh day of the seventh month, and the “Chrysanthemum Festival” on the Double Ninth, the ninth day of the ninth month. The early-ninth-century courts of Emperor Saga 嵯峨天皇 (786–842) and Junna 淳和天皇 (786–840) produced three imperially sponsored Sino-Japanese anthologies in rapid succession, a tradition that continued in transformed fashion with the twenty-one vernacular imperial anthologies (勅撰集 chokusenshū) compiled since the Kokinwakashū 古今和歌集 (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, 905) into the fifteenth century. The imperial court continued to be the center of literary production throughout Japan’s early period. Thus the dominant poetic modes were panegyric praise compositions (and their flip side, laments of failure in one’s official career and timely success); occasional poetry on seasonal events, celebrations, imperial outings and excursions; poems composed at diplomatic banquets hosted for envoys from surrounding states like the Korean states of Silla and Parhae; and pieces associated with other court institutions, such as the State...
Early Sino-Japanese Literature

Academy. Many Sino-Japanese poems (*kanshi* 漢詩), in keeping with their origin in court entertainment and performance, were composed collectively on set topics and with predetermined rhyme-words.

The State Academy was the third crucial factor that shaped the early history of Sino-Japanese literature. Many of its early graduates came from continental clans with scribal expertise (Hisaki 1990: 40). Often officials who were called to court to compose poetry for festivals and celebrations were related to the State Academy and its graduates. Japan never developed an examination system that linked academic success to government recruitment. The dominant scholarly families that produced the great majority of Heian scholars and Chinese-style poets were the Sugawara 菅原 and the Ōe 大江 clans and the Ceremonial branch of the Fujiwara 藤原. They ran their own schools in preparation for the exams. Though politically of lesser consequence, the State Academy was a crucial symbolic site embodying the prestige of Chinese learning, and the services its graduates and faculty rendered to the state were considerable: drafting administrative documents that kept the government running on a day-to-day basis in both the capital and the provinces, serving as tutors to the imperial family and giving lectures on canonical Chinese texts, and, not of least importance, educating the next generation of scholars (Smits 2007 and Steininger 2017). Still, the disjunction between cultural capital and actual political influence, which became ever more conspicuous from the late ninth century, led writers of vernacular tales and diaries to make fun of the Academy as a place of dusty, stuffy erudition out of touch with common sense and fashion, and of scholars as pathetic and self-important creatures. Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (d. ca. 1014) gleefully satirizes the academicians in *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 (*The Tale of Genji*) when the son of Genji, the blue-blooded romantic hero of this Heian tale of marriage politics, love, and court life, undergoes his coming-of-age ceremony and is subsequently introduced into the State Academy to begin his studies (translated in Washburn 2015: 427–429).

The Academy also stimulated the production of “academic” poetry in a distinctive Japanese mode: on the occasion of the *sekiten* (Ch. *shidian*) 釋奠 ceremony in honor of Confucius or the conclusion of a lecture cycle on the *Wen xuan* or the “Three Histories”—the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*), *Han shu* 漢書 (*History of the Former Han*), and *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (*History of the Later Han*)—the academicians would gather and compose poems, often using topics or topic lines from the given lecture text. Composing poetry for the *shidian* was customary during the Six Dynasty Period, but the practice disappeared in the Tang, unlike in Japan, where it enjoyed great popularity during the Heian period and beyond (McMullen 1996). And unlike Chinese “poems on history” (*yong shi shi* 詠史詩), such as the ones preserved in the *Wen xuan*, Heian Period “poems on history” came from a lecture event on the Three Histories, were written on a set topic, and did not contain a poet’s reminiscence about things past. This type of “academic” poetry offered Heian scholar-poets a creative venue for exploring the deeper meaning of the relevant lecture text and had a hermeneutic purpose. The practice of composing poetry on “topic lines” (*kudai* 句題) was part of a larger phenomenon in early Japanese
literary culture, with poets writing poems on topic lines from the Chinese Classics, Histories, Buddhist scripture, and Tang and Six Dynasties poetry.

The Corpus of Early Sino-Japanese Literature (Eighth through Twelfth Centuries)

Nara Period (710-784)

The establishment of a permanent capital in Nara precipitated the production of longer texts, including imperial histories, law codes, poetry anthologies, and poetic treatises. In quick succession, two imperial chronicles were produced, the *Kojiki* (712), which legitimates the historical foundations of the imperial ruling clan from its foundation by the sun goddess Amaterasu, and the Chinese-style *Nihon shoki* (720), which pulls together a large number of earlier sources into a more complex assessment of the origins of Japan’s imperial institution, its aristocratic clans and rulers. A collection of local gazetteers from various provinces, the *Fudoki* (Records of Customs and Lands, 713), complements the historical narratives of the center with local legends and transmitted oral lore. Adopting the chronicle format and omitting the sections on biography, treatises, or hereditary houses that became so defining for Chinese imperial historiography, the *Nihon shoki* and its subsequent “Six National Histories” (the last being completed in 901) constitute early Japan’s brief tradition of imperially commissioned Chinese-style histories.

The close nexus between the court and literary production is evident in *Kaifūsō*, which contains 120 poems by sixty-four authors, including imperial family members, court officials, and monks. Most poems come from poetry banquets for seasonal festivals, imperial excursions, or banquets hosted for Silla envoys. The title is programmatic: *kaifū*, 懷風 (“cherished airs”) looks to preserve the poetic production since Tenji’s court at the short-lived capital at Ômi; *sō*, 藻, a water-plant metaphor for elegant writing, lays claim to literary sophistication. With its chronological arrangement and its inclusion of biographies for the imperial family (and monks), *Kaifūsō* is a kind of poetic chronicle of eight decades of Chinese-style state building based on Tang models. As one of the earliest poetry anthologies in a secondary literary culture, which eagerly strove to emulate its reference culture, China, it shows a keen historical consciousness. Just as the *Wen xuan* preface provided inspiration for the vision of literary history in the *Kaifūsō* preface, Chinese medieval poetry provided a model of individual authorship and a rich treasury for sophisticated diction. No Shang or Zhou king could have written the couplet Emperor Monmu 文武 (r. 697–707) crafted on “moon”:

臺上澄流耀 Its liquid luster shines on the terrace
Early Sino-Japanese Literature

酒中沈去輪 as its departing wheel sinks into the wine cup.

(Kaifūsō 15)

Only the practiced observation and poetic obsession with surfaces in Six Dynasties poetry allowed Monmu to set the vast canvas of moonlight on the smooth surface of a large terrace against the glimmering speck of moon reflected in the poet’s wine cup.
Early Heian (794–ca. 900)

Modern scholars have called the ninth century the “Dark Age of National Style” (Kokufū ankoku jidai 国風暗黒時代) because it saw the production of imperial Sino-Japanese anthologies, while waka received imperial sanction only with the Kokinwakashū in the tenth century. Emperor Saga and his successor Junna commissioned three imperial anthologies: Ryōunshū 凌雲集 (Cloud-Topping Collection, 814), Bunka shūreishū 文華秀麗集 (Collection of Exquisite Literary Flourish, 818), and Keikokushū 経国集 (Collection for Ordering the State, 827). Saga vigorously promoted literature and gathered a devoted salon of poet-officials. His enthusiasm for kanshi is also evident in the support for his daughter Princess Uchiko 有智子内親王 (807–847), one of the rare female Heian kanshi poets. Keikokushū is most ambitious in sheer volume and its unprecedented inclusion of prose genres such as rhapsodies, poetry prefaces, and examination essays in addition to poetry. Unlike existing Tang anthologies, Saga’s compilers were keenly interested in experimenting with arrangement schemes: by official rank and site of composition (Ryōunshū), topic category (Bunka shūreishū), or genre (Keikokushū). The Saga anthologies constituted a groundbreaking step in literary history. They were the first imperial anthologies, and the nostalgia for the tragic Ômi court that hovered over Kaifūsō gave way to a proud exaltation of the present era’s splendors. They propagate the ideology that “Literature is the great affair in ordering the state,” in the words of Cao Pi’s “Discourse on Literature” (“Lun wen” 論文), which opened Ryōunshū and named Keikokushū; Saga received private lectures on Wen xuan, which contained the treatise and poetry of the Cao family literary salon and might explain the manifold references to the Cao court. Just as Cao Pi’s treatise pioneered literature as personal, immortal achievement and a realm distinct from politics, while highlighting the traditional nexus between politics and literature, the Saga anthologies evoked that courtly theme but claimed a new, “modern” (kindai 近代) aesthetic autonomy for belles lettres (Denecke 2015a).

Whereas we only have a handful of poems per poet during the Nara Period, with the Heian period we start having personal collections of individual authors, although only the six collections discussed below survive today.

The Spirit and Mind Collection (Seireishū or Shōryōshū 性霊集) is the personal collection of Kūkai 空海 (774–835), who is credited with the foundation of the esoteric Shingon sect. Having studied in Chang’an between 804 and 806, he was a major mediator and transmitter of Chinese culture. He brought back many personal collections of Six Dynasty and Tang poets and compiled Bunkyō hifuron 文鏡秘府論 (Ch. Wenjing mifu lun) (The Secret Treasury of the Mirror of Letters), which preserves excerpts of Chinese medieval poetical manuals that disappeared in China in the wake of the contempt of Song Dynasty literati for the “pedantry” of technical poetics. Poetics was not just a pastime for him; it was directly related to his concerns about proper pronunciation and recitation of Buddhist sutras. He was one of the very few Heian Japanese who seems to have had a
masterful command of spoken Chinese, in addition to his superior writing skills and intellectual depth.

The Denshi kashū 田氏家集 (Shimada Poetry Collection) is the personal collection of Shimada no Tadaomi 島田忠臣 (828–892), a close associate of the Sugawara clan, as he studied with Sugawara no Michizane’s father and became the young Michizane’s first tutor and later father-in-law. Unlike his pupil, he probably did not pass the last step of the civil service exams and, while lacking family background, entered the bureaucracy as a low-level bureaucrat, serving most of his life in middle-ranking posts. But his poetry contains such a refreshing earthy curiosity towards simple things that scholars sometimes claim for him what is usually associated with his student: that he transformed the courtly medium of kanshi into a mouthpiece for personal concerns, inspired by the popular verve of Bai Juyi’s newly introduced poetry collection.

Kanke bunsō 菅家文草 (Sugawara Literary Gems, 900) is one of the largest and most varied extant personal collections of Sino-Japanese literature and owes its status to its author, his poetic versatility, and his tragic fate. Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903) had an exceptionally distinguished career, eventually reaching the highest level of court offices as Minister of the Right (Borgen 1986). His fall from grace, probably due to machinations of the Fujiwara clan, was sudden, dramatic, and poetically productive. Banished to Dazaifu 太宰府, the government headquarters in Kyushu, in 901, he died in exile, but an intimidating string of natural disasters and deaths in the imperial family and Fujiwara clan helped his posthumous rehabilitation and even his deification as Tenjin 天神, the god of thunder and scholarship, today one of the most popular gods, worshipped in thousands of shrines all over Japan.

Scholars connect Michizane’s literary legacy intimately to the reception of Bai Juyi’s poetry in Japan. Literary historians often celebrate him for his turn away from the courtly style and his adoption of a voice that presumably expresses “feelings” rather than poetic decorum. They praise in particular his more plaintive exile poetry, written during a brief banishment to Sanuki province in 886 and during his last years in Dazaifu. The works from his final exile are preserved in Kanke kōshū 菅家後集 (The Later Sugawara Collection, 903). But we should not forget that this serves the prejudices of both traditional Chinese and Western romanticist poetics: at least since Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE), the idea that suffering produces good writing has been a staple of Chinese poetics, and the idea of valuing sincere feeling against the stifling constraints of poetic etiquette is a still popular legacy of nineteenth-century romanticism. Suggestively, in a tradition where literary artistry was valued over autobiographical sincerity it could work the opposite way: critics have, inversely, faulted Ovid with becoming “too realistic” and losing his literary sophistication in his exile poetry (Denecke 2014: 203–233).

A more productive way of understanding the relationship between Bai Juyi’s and Michizane’s poetry is to ask what Bai Juyi’s oeuvre helped Michizane do in his own poetry. There is no question that Michizane’s work shows an unprecedented variety of topics, versatility of poetic expression, and lyrical urgency. He appropriated much from Bai Juyi,
including poses of the leisurely everyday, the careful compilation of his own collection, the practice of occasionally adding self-commentary to his poems, and persistent gestures towards Bai Juyi’s poems and life. Bai Juyi had become an iconic yardstick by Michizane’s time. An envoy from Parhae flatteringly said that Michizane’s poems reached to the level of Bai Juyi’s, and Emperor Daigo 醍醐天皇 (885–930) supposedly even found that they topped Bai Juyi’s poetry. In the next century, Bai Juyi’s works penetrated deeply into Japanese culture. They appear as conversation pieces in Sei Shōnagon’s 清少納言 (d. early eleventh century) Pillow Book (Makura no sōshi 枕草子), as sustained subtexts to Murasaki Shikibu’s Tale of Genji, as subjects for screen paintings, and even as a primer for kanbun education for elite women. There are many possible reasons for Bai Juyi’s superlative prominence in Japan, but important factors were certainly his great contemporary popularity in China; his often refreshingly straightforward diction; his Buddhist humility, which had him serve the Buddha through the expedient means of poetry’s “crazy words and fancy expressions” (kyōgen kigo 狂言綺語); and, most appealingly for Heian courtiers, his ideal of being both “official and recluse” (ri’in 吏隠).
Mid- and Late Heian (ca. 900–1185)

The turn of the tenth century constitutes a major inflection point in Japanese cultural history. It is often seen as a moment of increasing “nativization,” with the end of the missions to China signaling a turn inward, the rise of the power of the Fujiwara clan occasioning major changes to the Chinese model of government (such as the introduction of the powerful position of regent and chancellor), and the emergence of the native kana syllabaries and of vernacular prose genres such as tales and diaries. The contrast between a dark-age “Sinicized” phase and the glorious emergence of native culture is obviously too simple to be true, but the turn of the tenth century does mark far-reaching shifts in Japan’s cultural landscape. We enter a new phase of engagement between vernacular and Chinese-style literatures, resulting in the production of a number of “synoptic texts,” which juxtapose native and Chinese-style verse and challenge the reader to compare and contrast the different poetic modes (Denecke 2014: 265–288).

An intriguing example is Shinsen Man’yōshū 新撰万葉集 (New Myriad Leaves, 893/913), a collection of about 250 waka poems matched with Sino-Japanese seven-syllable quatrains. Two thirds of the waka stem from a late-ninth-century poetry contest, during which two parties composed poems on the topics of spring, summer, fall, winter, and love, the basic arrangement pattern of later imperial waka anthologies starting with the Kokinshū. The preface links the collection to the eighth-century vernacular collection Man’yōshū 万葉集 (Collection of Myriad Leaves) and, to enhance this genealogy, the waka are written in Man’yōgana, Chinese graphs used phonographically, rather than in the newly emerging kana script. The aesthetic play with the juxtaposition of native waka and Chinese-style quatrains teases out some inherent poetic differences between waka and kanshi: the reliance on cosmological causality in the kanshi versus the impressionistic descriptiveness of the waka, analogies between nature and the human realm in kanshi versus a preference for metonymy and metaphor in waka, and the palpable presence of the poet as viewer or writer in kanshi versus the absence of an implied gaze or references to writing in waka (Denecke 2014: 265–288). However, because the kanshi were written in response to waka from the poetry contest, many kanshi appear to be “nativized,” for example those dealing with the topic of love, otherwise not a prominent topic in Heian kanshi.

The inverse dynamic is at work in another synoptic text compiled during that time, Ōe no Chisato’s Kudai waka 句題和歌 (Waka on Topic Lines, 897) or Chisatoshū 千里集, which culls Chinese lines from poems mostly by Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen and juxtaposes them with a poetic “translation” into waka poems. Here, waka poems sound like “translationese” of kanshi aesthetics. The aesthetics of contrastive juxtaposition is even explored in prose: the Kokinshū features a native (Kana) and a Sino-Japanese (Mana) preface (Wixted 1983). There is much dispute over which text was written first, and the vernacular preface became undoubtedly the classical cornerstone of waka poetics, comparable to the “Great Preface” to the Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry) for shi poetry. But for an early-tenth-century reader, vernacular prose was a riveting novelty, the
Kana preface being one of the earliest vernacular prose texts. Ironically, although the Chinese-style preface complained that the influx of Chinese characters, poems, and rhapsodies (shifu 詩賦) had led to a decline of waka, it was written in the expected language for prose prefaces and thus lent the Kokinshu authority by its linguistic form, while railing against the Chinese(-style) literary tradition.

Japan’s unquestionably most influential synoptic text is the Wakan rōeishū 和漢朗詠集 (Collection of Japanese and Chinese Texts for Recitation, hereafter Collection), an anthology of excerpts culled from texts by Chinese and Japanese authors compiled by Fujiwara no Kintō 藤原公任 (966–1041) around 1013 as a wedding gift for his daughter. It features some 800 poems and excerpts from various prose genres arranged by 125 encyclopedic topics in two books. The topics in the first book progress through the four seasons and their related festivals and customs. The second book treats topics selected from nature and human society, ranging from meteorology, botany, and zoology, letters and wine, houses and temples, emperors and ministers, and friends and courtesans to more abstract themes such as the impermanence of all things or—the ultimate closure to the collection—“whiteness.” Although many topical categories are borrowed from Chinese encyclopedias, Kintō added his own and arranged them in unique fashion. The effect was stunning. Within a century, the Collection was graced with commentaries, and it quickly became a schoolbook that taught necessary courtly skills. It became a primer for poetry chanting and calligraphy practice, and was committed to memory as a poetic dictionary for literary knowledge, anecdotes, and elegant diction. For centuries, it functioned as a mind-map for poetic topics and served as a method to learn how to compose “Topic Poetry” (kudaishi 句題詩), the mainstream genre of Heian kanshi for public occasions. The most prominent poet in the collection is Bai Juyi. His poetry heads most of the topic categories, followed by Sino-Japanese excerpts and capped with waka poems.

Although the “synoptic” nature of the Collection has obviously no precedent in China, it is ultimately a product of Six Dynasties and Tang “couplet culture,” which prized the excerpting of beautiful couplets (Ch. chaoju 抄句), their compilation into “couplet charts” (Ch. jutu 句図), or their reproduction in calligraphy on hanging scrolls; similarly, medieval technical poetics focused obsessively on the couplet or line as the main element of poetic meaning. The Collection is a “couplet charts” of sorts, which, unlike the Chinese “couplet charts” which eventually fell into oblivion, helped shape Japan’s literary culture, poetic production, and performance culture for centuries.

Kintō served during the reign of Emperor Ichijō 一条天皇 (r. 986–1011) and the splendid regency of Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1027), a period immortalized as the time when the female writers Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, and Akazome Emon 赤染衛門 (d. ca. 1040) lived and wrote, and thus a central focus for later imaginations of the “classical age.” Honchō reisō 本朝麗藻 (Beautiful Flourish from Our Court, (p. 563) ca. 1010), an anthology of more than 150 poems and a dozen prefaces compiled by the scholar-official Takashina no Moriyoshi 高階積善 (dates unknown) and arranged similarly to the Collection, with the first book following the seasons and a second book with encyclopedic topics,
contains much of the poetry—mostly “Topic Poetry”—composed at poetry banquets during Emperor Ichijō’s reign. Although writing on topics was popular during the Six Dynasties and the Early Tang, as is evident in Li Qiao Baiyong 李嶠百詠 (Li Qiao’s Hundred Verses), and the rhetorical template of poems required for the Chinese civil service examination certainly inspired Japanese “Topic Poetry,” the genre took on a distinctive form in Japan and gained far greater social and aesthetic importance (Satō 2007 and 2016, Denecke 2007). The “topic line” was usually culled from a pentasyllabic Chinese poem (or in the late Heian Period increasingly invented) and each of the couplets of the resulting “Topic Poem”—a regulated heptasyllabic poem composed on the line—had to follow a rhetorical template. The first couplet “stated the topic” (daimoku 题目), including all five topic-line characters; the second couplet “broached the topic” (hadai 破題), using ornate synonyms to restate the topic line; the third couplet usually included a “reference anecdote” (honmon 本文) from the Chinese histories, encyclopedias, and primers; and the fourth couplet concluded the poem with a polite “statement of feeling” (shukkai 述懐). Although this highly codified type of poetry did not make for inspired verse of poetic geniuses, it was a perfect and elaborate medium of social discourse during poetry banquets and gave everybody the opportunity to dash off an acceptable poem with relative ease. Furthermore, it encouraged the subtle verbalization of nature appreciation, leading to lexical expansion and diversification of allegorical expressions of virtuous and harmonious governance through natural imagery.

The second most influential Sino-Japanese text after the Collection was Fujiwara no Akihira’s 藤原明衡 (ca. 989–1066) Honchō monzui 本朝文粹 (Our Court’s Literary Essence, ca. 1066) (Denecke 2015b). Akihira established the fame of the Ceremonial Fujiwara branch of scholars by compiling model collections for literary education and emulation: Honchō monzui showcases scholarly and administrative genres, Meigō ōrai 明衡往来 (Akihira’s Letters) contains models for personal correspondence, and Shinsarugaku ki 新猿樂記 (Account of New Monkey Music), an account of a palace guard’s family’s visit to a popular festival, contains portrayals of contemporary types and professions ranging from provincial governors, students, Yin-Yang masters, and monks to sumo wrestlers, prostitutes, and gamblers. In Honchō monzui, Akihira canvasses two centuries of kanbun literature since the Saga court through 420-some pieces by seventy authors (excluding lower-ranking officials, monks, and women). Himself an avid collector of couplets, though his collection is lost, Akihira created a “deselected couplet chart” of sorts: he included 90 percent of the Sino-Japanese excerpts in the Collection as entire texts, which also shows the enormous popularity of the Collection at the time. Featuring thirty-nine genres, like the Wen xuan, Akihira highlights venerable Chinese genres like rhapsodies and shi poetry, but his collection was clearly geared towards mid-Heian exigencies. He adopted not even a third of the Wen xuan categories and filled the roster with genres relevant to Heian reality, such as “appointment documents,” “waka 奏 (p. 364) prefaces,” and the religious genres in the last two books, which with the exception of “prayers” are all of Japanese origin. But even genres with the same name could be two different things: most of the mere nine “prefaces” in the Wen xuan are for literary collections and thus not comparable
Early Sino-Japanese Literature

to the 150 “prefaces” in Honchō monzui, which were composed during poetry banquets as companion pieces to Topic Poems.

Also in contrast to the Wen xuan, dissent, criticism, and parody of court life have a prominent place in Honchō monzui. This resonated with mid-Heian literati’s disappointment with the contemporary scholarly world, where success was hard to earn, but political and economic reward was meager. Yoshishige no Yasutane’s 慶滋保胤 (d. 1002) “Account of My Pond Pavilion” (“Chiteiki” 池亭記) formulates much of the problems that two centuries later Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明 (ca. 1155–1216) would voice in Hōjōki 方丈記 (Account of My Ten-Square-Foot Hut), also a confession of reclusion and social disgust, but Yasutane is still more ambivalently caught between the dreams of political significance (which his Confucian values rather than his personal ambition demanded) and an alternative life, allowing him “a body at court and a mind’s ambition set on reclusion.” Minamoto no Shitagō’s 源順 (911–983) “Song of a Tailless Cow” 無尾牛歌 illustrates the sting of bitter social satire in Honchō monzui. Extolling the invisible virtues of his seemingly handicapped treasure—it doesn’t dirty its behind with its tail when pooping, is not put to hard work, is never stolen because uniquely recognizable, etc.—Shitagō’s closing promise to repay his cow once he himself gets promoted is a hardly veiled way to say that Shitagō is treating his beast better than the emperor treats his loyal scholar-officials.

Honchō monzui’s ambivalent role as a model anthology with at times satirical and plaintive tones contributed to its sustained success. With the advent of print culture in the seventeenth century, it was printed repeatedly, a sign that its pieces still served as models for literary composition and were internalized by generations of students. Its echoes resonate throughout Japanese literature, ranging from war tales to travel accounts and even to kana prose.

Indicative of the new themes and concerns that appear in the Late Heian period is Honchō mudaishi 本朝無題詩 (Non-Topic Poems From Our Court). With more than 770 poems by thirty poets ordered by thirty-seven topic categories ranging from events and locations to seasonal themes, it constitutes the largest collection of eleventh- and twelfth-century kanshi. As a collection that by virtue of its title features poetry other than mainstream courtly Topic Poetry, it gives us a remarkable view of a new poetic world that points toward the medieval period. Many poems discuss the pleasures of ordinary life, of gathering with friends and undertaking mountain temple visits. They dispense with elaborate allusions to Chinese poetry. Instead, some take up typical waka topics such as deutzia (a flowering plant, u no hana 卯花) or clover (hagi 萩 or shika naku kusa 鹿鳴草), which had not been part of the kanshi repertoire.

By the Late Heian, there was a rich corpus of Sino-Japanese literature, to which Ōe no Masafusa 大江匡房 (1041–1111), scion of the most prominent scholarly clan next to the Sugawara, contributed a good and variegated share. He was a superior writer of rhapsodies and Topic Poetry, composed “accounts” (ki 記) of fox spirits (Smits 1996), puppeteers, and female entertainers, and authored lives of Buddhist saints and
immortals, in addition to compiling a massive ceremonial compendium of the Ōe family and having his own waka collection. He sketched his vision of literature and letters in an allegorical “Account of the Realm of Poetry” (“Shikyōki” 詩境記):

As for the Realm of Poetry: it lacks water or soil, mountains or rivers and has no inhabitants or settlements. Even its whereabouts are unknown. One gets there in the blink of an eye just to be suddenly gone again. Reaching this fair realm is one of the most difficult things to achieve. Brush and ink are its expanse, sentiment and suffering its customs. Taxes are collected in units of blossoms and moon, and salary is exchanged with smoke and mist.

(Chōya gunsai, 64; Gotō 2012: 265–290)

Masafusa goes on to enthusiastically recount the history of Chinese literature, to finish by lamenting Japan’s scarcity of literature and good poets. But by the end of the Heian period, Sino-Japanese literature had thrived for about half a millennium and consisted of a rich and diversified body of texts. Masafusa was for once wrong.

Epilogue: What Chinese Literature Scholars Can Learn from Sino-Japanese Literature

Marginalized within today’s Japanese literary studies by the monopoly of native vernacular literature in Japan’s national literary canon and still considered derivative and imitative by many China scholars, Sino-Japanese literature has yet to receive the attention it deserves. Scholars have recently realized that it is a promising research field with many a hidden treasure to be discovered. So far, China scholars have recognized the importance of Sino-Japanese literature largely based on what I like to call the “outsourcing model” (which appreciates Japan as a treasure trove of Chinese texts lost in China) or the “canon correction model” (which uses Japanese anthologies that include Chinese poetry and poetics as a corrective that can help us peek beyond the Song canonization of Tang poetry). But Sino-Japanese literature can do much more for scholars of Classical Chinese literature. We should add an “alternative literary history model,” which throws the history of Chinese literature into clearer relief by virtue of a detour via Japan. To give just one example, it is often taken for granted that poetic production moved away from the court with the High Tang. After all the High, not the Early, Tang has made Tang poetry “Tang” and a worthy part of world literature. Modernist models of Chinese literary history celebrate this as a moment of triumph, a liberation from the stifling constraints of court conventions and an unleashing of individual voice and creativity. But once contrasted with the Japanese persistence of court-centered literary production up until the thirteenth century, the High Tang turn appears far more surprising and begs for a more extensive historical explanation, and also for a
reexamination of this lingering modernist (and actually rather nineteenth-century Romantic) bias in Chinese literary studies.

From this perspective, the Japanese literary tradition allows us to ask, for example, how Tang poetry unfolded differently from Japanese kanshi, or what Tang poetry could have been but only became in Japan (and vice versa) and why that was so. Like a historical experimental laboratory, Japanese literary culture allows us to look at Chinese literature in an oblique, productively defamiliarizing and refamiliarizing light that can help reassess well-established myths of Chinese literary history.

It can be particularly helpful in rehabilitating the value of Chinese court literature, in drawing attention to the aesthetics of composing on set topics, highlighting issues of recitation and performance, and giving sufficient consideration to the importance of the education system, primers, encyclopedias, and technical manuals for literary production, all of which, again, have been underappreciated in Chinese literary studies because of the Romantic-modernist bias. The corpus of Sino-Japanese literature and its rich body of fine modern scholarship is of distinctive importance as an integral part of Japanese literature and literary studies. As such, it can also teach us much about Classical Chinese literature.

**Bibliography**


Early Sino-Japanese Literature


Notes:

(1) Unless indicated otherwise the transcription of terms and titles in this chapter is Japanese.

Wiebke Denecke
Boston University