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Edited by
HARUO SHIRANE
and
TOMI SUZUKI
with
DAVID LURIE
Anthologization and Sino-Japanese literature: Kaijūō and the three imperial anthologies

WIEBKE DENECKE

In contrast to Western antiquity, poetry anthologies have been a prominent form of literary production in East Asia. They were a fitting format to accommodate relatively short poetic genres, give space to a variety of voices, and thus represent courts, eras, and the state of the literary art. The Shi jing (600 BCE), which unlike all later poetry collections is considered a “Classic,” embodies crucial elements of the ideology of anthology-making: a compiler figure related to a center of power; the assumption of an implicit political, ethical, or aesthetic agenda embodied in the anthology’s arrangement scheme; and the presentation of a “literary map,” which commemorated and exemplified particular traditions, and thematized societal values.

This ideology of anthologization fit the needs of the early Japanese state. Claiming a nexus between literacy production and virtuous rule allowed the elites to highlight their power in the form of courtly anthologies for moral and political edification, and for refined entertainment. In China courts were the central sites of poetic production until the eighth century, when many poets began to write from other vantage points. But in Japan the tradition of imperial anthologies, prefigured by the eighth-century Kaijūō, was pioneered by the three ninth-century kan shū anthologies and continued in the line of twenty-one imperial waka anthologies from the Kokin wakashū into the fifteenth century.

Kaijūō (751) is a collection of 120 predominantly pentasyllabic poems by sixty-four authors, including imperial family members, court officials, and monks. Most poems come from poetry banquets or outings, such as seasonal festivals, banquets for Silla embassies, excursions to Yoshino, or the Rites for Confucius (seki ten). The title, “Florilegium of Cherished Airs” is programmatic: kaifu (“cherished airs”) looks to preserve the poetic production since Tenji’s court at Ōmi (661–72), and sō, a waterplant associated with elegant

writing, lays bold claim to literary sophistication. With its chronological arrangement and its inclusion of biographies for the imperial family (and monks), Kaijūō is a kind of poetic chronicle of eight decades of state building, from Tenji’s first poetry banquets, through the destructive Jinshin War during which his son Prince Ōtomo was ousted by Tenji’s brother Tenmu in 672, up until the reign of the strong-willed Empress Kōken, whose lineage combined descent from Tenji, Tenmu, and the Fujiwara ancestor Nakatomi no Kamatari. Several influential court officials, most notably Fujiwara no Fuhito, feature in the anthology. Because the compiler shows unmistakable sympathy for the historical losers, Prince Ōtomo and the Ōmi court, scholars since the Edo period have believed that one of Ōtomo’s descendants, Ōmi no Mifune, compiled the anthology. Yet the abundance of poetry from the literary salon of Tenmu’s grandson Prince Nagaoka has inspired a host of alternative speculations.

Although it is questionable how widely the anthology circulated in its first centuries (all extant copies stem from a 1041 manuscript), Kaijūō is of premier significance for understanding the beginnings of literature in Japan. As the first poetry anthology in a secondary literary culture, which eagerly strove to emulate its reference culture, China, it shows a keen historical consciousness. The preface plots the rise of kan shū onto a broad timeline of civilization (bun) from the Age of the Gods and legendary beginnings under Emperor Jimmu, through the arrival of diplomatic writing and Confucian books from Korea and the establishment of ranks under Prince Shōtoku, climaxing with Emperor Tenji’s founding of an academy and hosting of poetry banquets. Though modeled on the preface to Wenxuan (J. Monzen), Japan’s earliest account of literary history tells a story staked on Japanese ground.

Just as medieval Chinese models of literary history, enhanced by Japan’s early chronicles, allowed the Kaijūō compiler to design a history of kan shū, medieval Chinese poetry provided a rich treasury of sophisticated diction. No early Chinese ruler could have written the couplet Emperor Monmu (r. 607–707) crafted on “moon”:

Its liquid luster shines on the terrace
as its departing wheel sinks into the wine cup. (Kaijūō 13)

Only the practiced observation and poetic obsession with surfaces in Six Dynasties poetry allowed the Japanese emperor to set the vastness of moonlight on the smooth surface of a large terrace against the glimmering speck of moon reflected in the poet’s wine cup.
Because of their temporal overlap Kaifūsō and Man'yoshū constitute an extraordinary testing ground for the emergence of Japan’s biliterate literary culture. Despite much valuable research tracing the mutual influence of particular imagery and tropes or comparing poems by authors anthologized in both, a broader understanding of how and to which effect Japan, of all East Asian cultures, developed from the outset such a robustly biliterate tradition is needed. If anything, Kaifūsō has been the Man’yoshū’s neglected twin, disparaged as a novice collection; its historical value is conceded but its literary worth denigrated, and what in Man’yoshū appears primeval and vigorous is considered primitive and imitative in Kaifūsō. Most scholars criticize its egregious disregard for the tonal rules of Chinese “regulated poetry,” rather than appreciating the poets’ passionate practice of parallel couplets; or they detect cases of “plagiarism” rather than understanding the lifting of lines from Chinese “originals” as in principle little different from the extensive borrowing of Chinese diction that characterizes early Sino-Japanese literature as a whole.

Sixty years after Kaifūsō, Emperor Saga and his successor Junna, both sons of Emperor Kamu, the founder of the Heian capital, commissioned three imperial anthologies in a short period of thirteen years: Ryōunki (Cloud-Topping Collection, 814), Bunka shiiretsu (Collection of Exquisite Literary Flourish, 815), and Keikokushū (Collection for Ordering the State, 827). Saga vigorously promoted literature. His policies enabled an unprecedented flourishing of the State Academy; he increased the occasions for public poetry composition by reviving or establishing annual festivals such as the “Flower Banquet” (hana no en), the “Palace Banquet” (naien), and the “Double-Ninth” Chrysanthemum Festival; in addition to the anthologies he commissioned a new family register, a ritual code, and an official history. His own poetry fills a fifth of the anthologies, and he gathered an impressive salon of poet-officials, a number of whom helped compile the anthologies. His enthusiasm for kanshi is also evident in the support for his daughter Princess Uchiko, the first Kamo priestess and one of the rare female Heian kanshi poets, who features in Keikokushū.

The first two anthologies have a narrower scope: Ryōunki includes kanshi from the past three decades, while Bunka shiiretsu only has poetry from the four years since Ryōunki. Keikokushū, unfortunately only partially preserved, gives a panorama of more than a century of literary production and is most ambitious in its sheer volume and its unprecedented inclusion of prose genres such as rhapsodies, poetry prefaces, and examination essays. Unlike existing Tang anthologies, which mostly go by authors, Saga’s compilers eagerly experimented with arrangement schemes: by official rank (Ryōunki), topic category (Bunka shiiretsu), or genre (Keikokushū).

Although there is much implicit continuity with Kaifūsō 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 (bunki) is the great affair in ordering the state,” in the words of Cao Pi’s (Emperor Wen of Wei’s) “Treatise on Literature,” which open the Ryōunki preface and gave name to the Keikokushū. Saga received private lectures on Wenxuan, which contained the treatise and poetry from the Cao family salon and might explain the manifold references to the Cao court. Just as Cao Pi’s treatise pioneered literature as a personal, immortal achievement and a realm distinct from politics, while also heralding the traditional nexus between politics and literature, the Saga anthologies evoked that courtly theme but claimed a new, “modern” (kindai) aesthetic autonomy. This enhanced historical awareness applied also to Chinese literature, whose history was for the first time sketched in the Keikokushū preface. This resonated with literature’s spatial expansion during the Saga period. Poetry was increasingly composed beyond the confines of the palace, at the Shinsen’en Garden or southwest of the capital at Kaya, a detached palace for hunting excursions named after Heyang, a pleasure spot outside of Luoyang associated with the poet Pan Yue. Instead of entering the realm of the immortals, as Kaifūsō poets had done on excursions to Yoshino, Saga and his courtiers discovered rustic charms at Kaya: the babble of simple folk, noisy monkeys, and a sometimes inconvenient, but palpable, nature.

The early Sino-Japanese anthologies represent the foundations of court poetry in Japan and show the importance of kanshi both as a domestic and cross-cultural medium of communication and entertainment. Court poetry is not just poetry produced at court. It had its characteristic sites and occasions, topics and themes, and typical set of participants; it was supported by sociopolitical institutions and an ideology that gave literature a prominent place in the political realm; and it produced an anti-court rhetoric that counterbalanced its social stricture and could mediate a poet’s career-related disappointments.

As in medieval China up to the eighth century, court banquets were a generative site of poetry in early Japan. They were mostly held in the palace, at mansions of the aristocracy or at detached palaces beyond the capital on the occasion of excursions, seasonal festivals or Academy-related events.
They produced collective poetry on set topics, which, increasingly in the Saga anthologies, included rhyme-matching. This engendered a rich vocabulary of sophisticated judgment of the natural world and human emotions. Typically banquets included various “subjects” and the emperor, who had a dual role as sovereign worthy of panegyric praise for his civil virtues and erudition, and also as imaginary equal to his poet-courtiers. This role-play was pronounced in Saga’s salon and might have encouraged the popularity of certain fictional scenarios that bore little relation to Heian realities: the Chinese “border poem” lamenting bleak frontier wars, “boudoir laments,” and the “pinning wife poem” allowing male poets to write in a female voice about the pains of separation.

The main institutions that shaped early kanshi production were the court bureaucracy and the State Academy. Many poets remained middle-ranking officials, but the ideology of literature articulated in the prefaces to the Sino-Japanese anthologies gave their poetry a central place in the “ordering of the state.” This disjunction between cultural and political capital experienced by scholar-officials became ever more prominent in the following centuries, as is evident in Honchō monzui (The Literary Essence of Our Court).

The rhetoric of imperial praise also engendered a poetic embracing of escape and reclusion. True, we occasionally find genuine anti-court poems by poets who were indeed exiled (e.g. Isonokami no Otomaro). But the pose of reclusion was overwhelmingly more common than its reality. It came in several guises: in the Kaifūsō the exuberant rejection of society in Taoist guise, inspired by the unrestrained world of the third-century Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, is popular. The Saga anthologies repeatedly invoke the trope of Confucian recluses, whom the ruler finds in the wilderness and draws as brilliant officials to his court. The rhetoric of reclusion was paradoxical because the world of recluses and immortals could be portrayed as opposed to but also superposed with the court. This function of the reclusion topic becomes most obvious in lines by Kowakara no Haraka:

We’ve climbed high, yet are not beyond the human world:
both officials and recluses at once. (Ryūmusha 90)

Reclusion tropes could even turn erotic, as when Ono no Minemori describes a Double-Ninth Festival bringing together beautiful women and recluses (Ryūmusha 40).

Despite a strongly emulative relation to Chinese poetry, Japanese poets adapted the medium to their own needs. They coined expressions that are not attested in contemporary Chinese sources. The distinctive connections

between the court, reclusion, the world of immortals, and romantic love in early Sino-Japanese anthologies are still little explored. If Chinese boudoir laments were usually written by male poets in the female voice, in early Japan, where vernacular poetry allowed communication between the sexes, a man could write a “boudoir lament” about himself (Kaifūsō 118) and a woman could write one for herself (Banke shūrōshū 50, 55).

The early Sino-Japanese anthologies also highlight kanshi as a transnational skill and a medium of cross-cultural communication. Many of the poet-officials in the Kaifūsō who were associated with the State Academy came from Korean immigrant lineages. The anthologies feature poetry written by Japanese on embassies to China, by Japanese when hosting Silla envoys, or even by a Parhae envoy visiting Japan. However, such poems are few: eighth- and ninth-century kanshi composition was not a sporadic transnational skill but a solid practice predominantly put to domestic purposes.

The early Sino-Japanese anthologies have a long history of neglect. Unlike vernacular collections that explicitly harked back to the Man'yōshū, the Saga anthologies make no explicit reference to Kaifūsō; in the Edo period Emura Hokkai’s kanshi history (Nihon shishi, 1770) skims over both; and modern scholarship has been scarce, because they had become “foreign literature” outside of the mainstream national literature paradigm. In general, the Kaifūsō, as a product of the “Man’yō Age,” fares a bit better. The Saga anthologies suffer as products of what has been called in the wake of Kojima Noriyuki, ironically their most passionate scholar, the “Dark Age of National Poetry,” when kanshibun thrived amid a relative scarcity of waka.1 But the fact that explicit tradition building is so weak in the Sino-Japanese tradition, which is episodic and eclectic rather than continuous and self-conscious, should not overshadow the fundamental importance of the early Sino-Japanese anthologies for Japanese literary culture.