

KANSHI

Scholars in the Heian period in Japan—that is, from the middle of the seventh century to 1185—wrote poetry in both Chinese and Japanese. There are two terms for the Chinese language writing that they did: *kanshi* means “Chinese poetry” and *kambun* means “Chinese prose.” I. Smits, however, tells us that the designations *kanshi* and *kambun* are Western designations, and further queries whether Sino-Japanese poetry is in fact “Chinese,” or is better understood as a form of Japanese.¹ In the heyday of *kanshi*, there were two principal forms in which poetry could be written in Japanese: the *tanka* and the *chōka*.² The *tanka* was limited to thirty-two syllables. The *chōka* followed a similar rhythm to the *tanka*, but was unlimited in length. However, in the Heian period, the *chōka* dropped almost entirely out of use. *Kanshi*, like *chōka*, stipulated no rules around length. Though early *kanshi* were quite short, when poets did wish to write long, it was an obvious and available form to go to. Minamoto no Shitagō (911-983) thus wrote “Song of the Tailless Ox” as *kanshi*. Burton Watson, the American translator of both Chinese and Japanese, wonders whether, had *chōka* been in style, Minamoto might have written this “Song” in Japanese instead:

I have an ox but its tail is missing:
 everyone pokes fun at my tailless ox.
 Born a wild calf, it was chewed by a wolf,
 but I well understand why it escaped the wolf’s jaws:
 it’s so wise you’d take it for an old pine spirit,
 far plumper and bigger than those grazers under
 the fruit trees . . .³

1. I. Smits, “Chinese Poetry in Japan,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition*, ed. Roland Green et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

2. Burton Watson, trans., *Japanese Literature in Chinese: Volume 1: Poetry and Prose in Chinese by Japanese Writers of the Early Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 11.

3. *Ibid.*, 65

Watson worries whether the kanshi written by Japanese poets were any good, since they were writing in a foreign tongue, and further, mimicking styles made popular by Chinese poets:

... we may say that the Japanese, at least during the eighth and ninth centuries when they were in close contact with the mainland and when Chinese studies were in greatest vogue in court and intellectual circles, could write Chinese verse, and to a less extent Chinese prose, with considerable competence, though understandably without any remarkable inventiveness or flair.⁴

He's particularly concerned about those moments when native Japanese linguistic habits might give their writers away:

The kanshi, to be sure, especially those of the later period, at times display oddities of word order or expression that are uncharacteristic of poetry composed on the continent and seem to be due to influences from the native language. Such oddities would no doubt draw disapproving frowns from Chinese readers, though whether they are from a technical point of view serious enough to affect the overall worth of the poetry I do not feel qualified to judge. ... Since Chinese prose, unlike Chinese verse, is not governed by any set of technical rules, but depends for its effectiveness upon more subtle consideration of rhythm and euphony, it is more difficult to write with genuine grace.⁵

Watson's anxiety is interesting in light of the perpetual Western anxiety about Asian accents. To be sure, Chinese people are as snobby as anyone else, and disdainful of those who don't speak or write in terms they'd deem correct. I wish I could read these "oddities of word order"! In light of a contemporary recognition of the value of the local, these oddities might prove more beautiful than it appears to those for whom correctness is the primary value. If Chinese prose is not governed by rules of word order, who is to say whether Japanese linguistic habits are more or less graceful than Chinese ones? And if Chinese poetry is more rule-bound, who is to say whether there's more grace in sticking to the rules than in breaking them?

4.
Ibid., 8-9.

5.
Ibid., 8.

Watson worries about the eruptions of Japanese linguistic habits even in the work of Sugiwarara no Michizane, a court scholar in Kyoto in the early Heian period, and one of the writers of kanshi whom Watson admires most.

Michizane's story is a sad one. A gifted scholar of Chinese studies at a time when Japanese envoys and monks went regularly to China and Chinese scholars came regularly to Kyoto, Michizane became a distinguished teacher, and later, governor of the province of Sanuki, and still later, as Udajin or Minister of the Right.⁶ But he was abruptly accused by his enemies of ill deeds (we don't know what they were because the records were destroyed), unseated from his position, and sent into exile in Kyushu. All of his children were also exiled—he was allowed to keep only his two youngest with him. Even his wife could not accompany him. First his little son died, and then Michizane himself passed away of malnutrition and beriberi. Here's a kanshi he wrote in the year 902, some months before his death:

The hours of the spring night are not many,
the breath of spring rain should be warm,
but a man with many sorrows
finds himself at odds with the season.
When the heart is cold, the rain too is cold;
nights when you can't sleep are never short.
The gloss is gone from my skin, my bones dry up;
tears keep coming to sting my eyes;
boils and rash, beriberi in my legs—
shadows of sickness darken my whole body.
Not only does my body fail me—
the roof leaks, no boards to fix it,
dampening the clothes draped on the rack,
ruining the books and letters in their boxes.
And what of the complaints of the cook,
tending a stove where no smoke rises?
Rain may bring excess of joy to farmers;
for a stranger in exile it only means more grief.
The grief and worry form a knot in my chest;
I get up and drink a cup of tea,
drink it all, but feel no relief.
I heat a stone, try to warm the cramps in my stomach,
but this too has no effect,
and I force myself to down half a cup of wine.
I must think of the Emerald Radiance,⁷
think! think! put my whole heart in it!
Heaven's ways of dealing out fortune—
how can they be so unfair!⁸

6.
Ibid., 73–74, 76.

7.
The Pure Land of the Emerald Radiance, presumably a spiritual place in Buddhist understandings, presided over by the Buddha of Healing, Yakushi Nyorai.

8.
Watson, 119.

Though he was later absolved of any wrongdoing and posthumously restored to his former position, there is obviously little satisfaction to be had from the spirit world. Watson tells us he was worshipped as an *onryō*, that is, a spirit of wrath and vengeance. My Iron Goddess of Mercy would like that, I think.

Readers might wonder why I'm interested in a form like kanshi, a long-dead Japanese bureaucrat-scholar like Michizane, or a translator like Watson. As a poet whose mother tongue has evaded her and who, as a child, betrayed her mother tongue under pressure from the assimilative pressures of Canadian Multiculturalism and the Newfoundland schoolyard of my youth, I need the translators in order to understand where I've come from. I betrayed my mother tongue before I knew what language was. My mother taught me English first, so I wouldn't have an accent.

Watson is an ex-US navy man who became a sinologist in the wake of his posting to China during WWII. He couldn't get a job in China because of the Cold War, and was never granted a position in Hong Kong or Taiwan. He got one in Japan, and became interested in Japanese language and culture. He was probably gay. Watson's obituary in the *New York Times* says he never married but was survived by his long-time companion.⁹ As for me, though I was a member of the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop and a mentee of Jim Wong-Chu in my early days, many of my teachers, friends, and interlocutors have been Japanese Canadian: Roy Miki, Hiromi Goto, Tamai Kobayashi, Mona Oikawa, Cindy Mochizuki, Grace Eiko Thompson, Monika Kin Gagnon, Scott Toguri McFarlane, Kirsten Emiko McAllister. It's these relationships (among others) that have made my life possible, more than any university. These relationships have been connected to movements to be sure—Asian Canadian movements, BIPOC movements, queer movements, unnamed and loosely spiritual movements.

In the field of Canadian cultural difference, the step from Chinese Canadian to Japanese Canadian seems a short one, but it's hard to forget Chinese and Japanese difference in the wake of WWII. That alliances can be found under the banner "Asian Canadian" is wonderful; the artificiality of the construct notwithstanding. Formations are arbitrary and constantly shifting, yet as we inhabit them they become real. "Asian" is a useful term

9. William Grimes, "Burton Watson, 91, Influential Translator of Classical Asian Literature, Dies," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2017.

for fighting back against the state when it is racist. It is useful for fighting Western imperialism. It's less useful when it is deployed by one "Asian" state to oppress and subjugate other "Asian" states, or its own people.

For me, "Asian" has been a freeing term, one that lets me step away from "Chinese." "Chinese," as a formation, can be so demanding. Years ago, I had a community plot in Mount Pleasant, near the View Court Co-op where I lived at the time. My garden was unkempt, but very productive. I had a couple of rows of lo bak (a.k.a. daikon) that poked their massive snouts out all over the other rows. I was working on it early one evening when an old Asian man came down the lane. He watched me for a few seconds, then said, "You Chinese?"

"Yes," I said.

"Me too," he said. He began to tell me how to keep a proper garden. His tone was half instructional and half berating. Would he have felt so comfortable if I had said "no"?

If my Chinese relations are Confucian, paternal, possessive, and berating, "Asian" is a more utopian term. Sure, it seeks belonging in an oppositional way, through a refusal of "Oriental" and all that that term signifies. "Asian" is a term of remaking in the wake of the long, unfolding, colonial moment. But it also has many problems. The Pan-Asian anti-colonial alliances of the early twentieth were wonderful for their initial intentions to drive the colonizer out, and also for their alliances, however unstable, with Pan-African movements. The WWII turn to Pan-Asian fascisms, however, was not so pretty.

To think of "Asian" as a coalitional term with utopian leanings, however, is still useful for building relationships. And in that building, it's also helpful to realize that the connections are old. Though I'm not the kind of specialist Burton Watson is in Chinese and Japanese language and history, I can see that in the Heian period there were complex power relations between Japan and China. I can see that Japan looked to China for strategies of governance and for cultural prestige. Kanshi might be a kind of cultural appropriation, but given the power relationship then, I don't find it offensive. I'm more interested in the ways Japanese poets of that time could use kanshi to become themselves a little more

freely, by leaving behind the strictures demanded by their own culture. In the twentieth century, when Japan was up and China was down, relations weren't nearly so diplomatic. Between Japan and China, the shoe keeps changing feet. To know that there were poetic, spiritual, and ambassadorial exchanges between the two countries in the tenth century reminds me that both cultures have been around for a long time. In our relationship through kanshi, we are not newcomers or immigrants, but members of dynamic and shifting cultures of exchange. We've been talking to one another for a long time. It's this discussion that I enter into when I talk to my JC friends. These discussions and relationships are available across other fields of difference too—Asianness in all its relations: Korean, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, South Asian, Near Asian, and more; from Asianness to Indigeneity; from Blackness to Asianness. The power relations aren't necessarily fair or equal, and sometimes they need to be triangulated through whiteness, but they don't always need to be. Further, they're alive and growing right now.

Rabinovitch and Bradstock tell us that in the Nara and Heian eras, kanshi were part of the ceremonies and relationships governed by protocol to perpetuate the values and hierarchies of court: “‘Communing’ through verse was a means to enhancing social stability within the competitive and hierarchical society of the court, providing also a sense of continuity with the past. . . .”¹⁰ Further, interestingly, it was through Korean experts that the ancient Japanese acquired Sinitic writing and literacy. In the third and fourth centuries they inscribed Chinese characters on reflective surfaces: mirrors and swords.¹¹

To engage kanshi is to step into the house of the adjacent other, and there, to look in the mirror in order to see oneself, and so become oneself differently.

10.
Judith Rabinovitch and Timothy
Bradstock, eds. and trans., *No
Moonlight in my Cup: Sinitic Poetry
(Kanshi) from the Japanese Court,
Eighth to Twelfth Centuries*
(Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1.

11.
Ibid., 1-2.