

Man'yōshū (Collection of Myriad Ages, eighth century)

The *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Myriad Ages*) is Japan's oldest anthology of poetry and consists of twenty volumes containing more than 4,500 poems (*uta*), most of which were composed between the mid-seventh and the mid-eighth century. The *Man'yōshū* appears to have been edited in several stages by different people over seventy or eighty years. The first half of volume 1 was probably compiled at the beginning of the eighth century, and the first sixteen volumes had been written by 744. The finished product was probably completed between 770 and 785.

The two main poetic forms of the *Man'yōshū* are the *tanka* (short poem) and the *chōka* (long poem). When a *tanka* is placed after a *chōka*, it is sometimes referred to as a *hanka* (envoy). The *tanka* consists of five metric units, or *ku* (measures), in a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable pattern. The *chōka*, which can be of various lengths, alternates between measures of five and seven syllables, closing with three measures usually in a 5/7/7 syllable pattern. Some of the early *chōka* in the *Man'yōshū*, however, follow a short measure / long measure pattern, without strict syllable measures. Most of the poems in the *Man'yōshū* are *tanka*, with the *chōka* form tending to be composed by specialized poets on specific themes.

Two important rhetorical figures of the poetry of the *Man'yōshū* are the *makurakotoba* (pillow-phrase) and the *tsuiku* (binary measure). Pillow-phrases, usually consisting of five syllables, are formulaic epithets that modify a specific word. In many cases they are used before place-names, but they also modify words like “palace,” “gods,” “life,” and other terms of special significance. Some pillow-phrases are words of praise, others are simply descriptive, and many have obscure meanings and origins. Originally they may have lent a sacred significance to the words they modified and some may be references to legends, particularly those modifying place-names. One of their key functions appears to have been rhythmic. Because the pillow-phrase (5) and the modified phrase (7) must be read together as a unit, they tend to produce a 5-7 / 5-7-7 rhythm in the *tanka* and a 5-7 / 5-7 / 5-7 rhythm in the *chōka*. *Tsuiku* (binary measures) are a rhetorical technique of Chinese origin most often used in *chōka*. The most common *tsuiku* establish some kind of spatial or temporal framework, such as day/night, morning/evening, spring/autumn, land/sea, and heaven/earth and thus often appear in poems praising the extent of the emperor's rule.

The *Man'yōshū* is written entirely in Chinese characters, which were used in two main ways, as *kun* or Japanese readings, eg., reading the graph for “house” 家 as *ipe* (MJ *ie*) and as *on* or one-unit Sino-Japanese readings (reading the graph for “house” as *ke*).

Both *kun* and *on* readings could have either semantic or phonetic value (i.e, they could be read for their meaning or just for their sound, depending on the context in which they were used). Other possibilities included the reading of characters by semantic association, such as writing the character for “winter” 冬 but reading it as “cold” (*samusi*).

Looking at the *Man'yōshū* as a whole, it is clear that *uta* (poetry) was a very versatile practice: it was used to praise the political order, as mythical-historical narrative, as an expression of mourning, to tell tales and legends, for both real and fictional social interaction and correspondence, to mark public occasions at court, and as entertainment at banquets. In addition, and perhaps most important, poetry was something to be collected and classified in encyclopedic fashion. The *Man'yōshū* thus was compiled not only as a definitive guide to poetic practice but also as a monument of poetic knowledge.

The first four poems in the *Man'yōshū* (translated below) function as an exemplary sequence to introduce the authority of the sovereign. The first two poems are by emperors: Yūryaku, a legendary emperor from the fifth century, three hundred years before the *Man'yōshū* was compiled, and Jomei (r. 629-641), the paternal father and grandfather of the late seventh-century rulers who established Yamato as a Chinese-style imperial state and gave it the name of “Nihon” (Japan). The third and fourth poems are by imperial subjects who are praising their rulers: the first by a woman of the imperial family, the second by a high-ranking male courtier (a distant relation of the emperor). While the praise of imperial authority in the first three poems is fairly obvious, the last poem is more subtle.

*The reign of the heavenly sovereign
who ruled all under heaven from the
Asakura palace in Hatsuse*

泊瀬朝倉宮
御宇天皇代

Heavenly Sovereign Opohatuse Wakatakeru

大泊瀬稚武天皇

*An imperial poem composed
by the heavenly sovereign*

天皇御製歌

Your basket,
with your lovely basket,

ko mo yo miko moti
籠 毛 與 美籠母乳

your trowel,
with your lovely trowel,

pukusi mo yo mibukusi moti
布久思 毛 與 美夫君志 持

Girl picking herbs
on this hillside:

kono woka ni na tumasu ko
此 岳 尔 菜 採 須 兒

Tell me your house,
tell me your name.

ipe norase na norasane
家 告 閑 名 告 紗 根

Seen from the sky
in the land of Yamato¹

sora mitu yamato no kuni pa
虚 見 津 山 跡 乃 國 者

I am the one
who conquers and rules,

osinabete ware koso wore
押奈戸手 吾 許 曾 居

I am the one
who conquers and reigns.

sikinabete ware koso imase
師吉名倍手 吾 己 曾 座

So let it be
me who tells you

ware kosoba norame
我 許 背 齒 告 目

of my house and my name.

ipe wo mo na wo mo
家 呼 毛 名 雄 母

*The reign of the heavenly sovereign
who ruled all under heaven from
the Okamoto palace in Takechi.*

高市岡本宮
御宇天皇代

*Heavenly Sovereign Okinaga Tarashihi
Hironuka.*

息長足日廣額天皇

*An imperial poem composed when the
heavenly sovereign climbed Mt. Kagu
and looked upon the land:*

天皇登香具山
望國之時御製歌

In Yamato
there is a range of hills

yamato ni pa murayama ari to
山 跡 庭 村 山 有 等

¹ “Seen from the sky” (*sora mitu*) is a pillow-phrase for the place name Yamato.

that encircles
the heavenly Mt. Kagu,
and when I climb
to look upon the land
on the land plain,
the smoke rises and rises
on the sea plain,
the seagulls rise and rise
a splendid land
is the island of the dragonfly,
the land of Yamato!

*When the heavenly sovereign went
hunting on the fields of Uchi, the
Intermediate Sovereign had Hashihito
no Muraji Oyu present this poem*

Our mighty lord
who rules the eight directions
in the morning
he picked up with delight,
in the evening
he raised up by his side
his favorite
bow of catalpa wood:
hear the sound
that its bowstring makes!
Now he departs
in the morning to hunt,
now he departs
in the evening to hunt;
his favorite
bow of catalpa wood,
hear the sound
that its bowstring makes!

Envoy

toriyoropu ame no kaguyama
取與呂布 天乃香具山

noboritati kunimi wo sureba
騰立 國見乎為者

kunipara pa keburit tatitatu
國原波 煙立龍

unapara pa kamame tatitatu
海原波 加萬目立多津

umasikuni so akidusima
怜何國 曾蜻嶋

yamato no kuni pa
八間跡能 國者

天皇遊獵
内野之時、
中皇命使
間人連老獻歌
yasumisisi waga opokimi no
八隅知之 我大王乃

asita ni pa torinadetamapi
朝廷 取撫賜

yupupe ni pa iyoritatas i
夕庭 伊緣立之

mitorasi no adusayumi no
御執乃 梓弓之

nakapazu no oto su nari
奈加弭乃 音為奈利

asakari ni ima tatasu rasi
朝獺尔 今立須良思

yupukari ni ima tatasu rasi
暮獺尔 今他田渚良之

mitorasi no adusayumi no
御執能 梓弓之

nakapazu no oto su nari
奈加弭乃 音為奈里

反歌

On the great fields
of Uchi, carved from gems,
he arrays horses,
and at dawn must be riding
on those fields of deep grass

*At the time of an imperial visit to the
district of Aya in the land of Sanuki,
Lord Ikusa looked toward the hills
and composed these poems.*

The haze rises
over the long spring day,
as dusk arrives,
and without knowing why
I feel a pain
in the depths of my heart
like a young thrush
that weeps without a sound,
when like gem-cords
responding to my yearning,
over these hills
to which we have arrived
with our great lord,
who is a distant god,
wind comes blowing
into my lonely sleeves,
calling me home
with every dawn and dusk,
so I who thought
I was a man of courage,
on this journey
where grasses are my pillow,
do know not how
to get rid of this anguish,
and like the salt

tamakiparu uti no opono ni
玉 剋 春 内 乃 大 野 尔

uma namete asa pumasuramu
馬 數 而 朝 布 麻 須 等 六

sono kusapukano
其 草 深 野

幸 讚 岐 國
安 益 郡 之 時、
軍 王 見 山 作 歌

kasumi tatu nagaki parupi no
霞 立 長 春 日 乃

kurenikeru waduki mo sirazu
晚 家 流 和 豆 肝 之 良 受

murakimo no kokoro wo itami
村 肝 乃 心 乎 痛 見

nuekotori uranakeworeba
奴 要 子 鳥 卜 歎 居 者

tamadasuki kake no yorosiku
珠 手 次 懸 乃 宜 久

topotukami waga opokimi no
遠 神 吾 大 王 乃

idemasi no yamakosu kaze no
行 幸 能 山 越 風 乃

pitori woru waga koromode ni
獨 座 吾 衣 手 尔

asayopi ni kaperapinureba
朝 夕 尔 還 比 奴 礼 婆

masurawo to omoperu are mo
大 夫 登 念 有 我 母

kusamakura tabi ni si areba
草 枕 客 尔 之 有 者

omopiyaru taduki wo sirani
思 遣 鶴 寸 乎 白 土

ami no ura no ama wotomera ga
網 能 浦 之 海 處 女 等 之

that the sea maidens roast
in Ami Bay,
my heart deep within me
is smoldering with longing.

Envoy

Over the hills
the wind is always blowing,
as every night
I continue to yearn
for my sister² at home

yaku sipo no omopi so moyuru
焼 塩 乃 念 曾 所 焼

a ga sitagokoro
吾 下 情

反歌

yamagosi no kaze wo toki jimi
山 越 乃 風 乎 時 自 見

nuru yo otizu ipe naru imo wo
寐 夜 不 落 家 在 妹 乎

kakete sinopitu
懸 而 小 竹 櫃

(Translations by Torquil Duthie)

² “Sister” means wife or lover. It is not meant to be taken literally.