

## **Review Article**

# **JAPANESE LITERATURE AS A MODERN INVENTION**

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Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki, eds., *Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, xvi + 333 pp. ISBN: 0804741050 (hbk).

As its title clearly indicates, *Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature* brings together two ideas currently very much in vogue: that of the “invention of tradition”, especially in support of the processes of modernization and nation-building, and the related idea of the literary canon as a more or less arbitrary expression of power – that is, as artificially constructed for political rather than literary or aesthetic purposes. In other words, the traditional view that a long-established cultural monument or institution such as the literary canon represents quite simply, in Matthew Arnold’s words, “the best which has been thought and said in the world” is now seen as politically naïve at best and as disingenuous (along elitist, racist, sexist, or imperialist lines) at worst. As one of the editors, Haruo Shirane, writes in his Introduction, the word “canon” is used in this book in the “broader, more political sense” to mean “those texts that are recognized by established or powerful institutions” (2). (He refers to Paul Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* [1994] as a key text of this new canon theory.) More specifically, the book’s objective is to “historicize this complex sociopolitical process [of Japanese canon formation], particularly as it relates to the emergence of linguistic and cultural nationalism” which privileged certain texts as “cultural icons of Japan’s ‘tradition’” (1). Against the traditional “foundational” canon theory which sees a foundation in the text, “some universal, unchanging, or absolute value”, the new relativistic approach is described by Shirane as “antifoundational” in that it “holds that there is no foundation in the text, that works in a canon reflect the interests of a particular group or society at a particular time” (2). Shirane argues further that this concept of canon implies conflict and change, unlike the terms classic and tradition, “both of which suggest something unchanging or given” (2).

“Traditions” and “classics” are now seen as “constructed, particularly by dominant communities or institutions”, rather than (presumably, although Shirane does not really spell this out) as naturally or spontaneously arising out of a lengthy aesthetics-based literary-historical process of sifting out the great from the merely good – or the downright bad.

As for the actual processes of canon formation, Shirane identifies no less than ten different “institutional practices” in the Japanese case, including: the preservation and transmission of texts (especially before printing); commentary and criticism; use in school curricula; use as a model and a source of allusion; use for historical knowledge; use as a religious scripture; inclusion in anthologies; use in genealogies; mention in literary histories; and, finally, use in state ideology (3). In many of these practices, Shirane also points out, “there is a prominent stress on genealogy and ‘origins,’ which become a frequent source of authority, ranging from the origins of a clan (*uji*), a family house (*ie*), a school (*mon*), to national origins” (3-4).

Another important aspect of the history of canon formation is the “rise and fall of different genres or modes” (4). The end result is that, when we survey Japanese literary history as a whole, we are confronted not by a single, permanently established canon but by a number of “competing canons”. In the Heian period, for instance, Buddhist scriptures were regarded as the “highest” genre, followed by Confucian texts, histories, Chinese literature, and only lastly by the two native literary genres, *waka* (poetry) and *monogatari* (fiction) written not in Chinese characters but in the native *kana* syllabary. This was a genre and language hierarchy that followed the Chinese model: fiction relegated to the bottom, and Chinese over Japanese. In the 18th century, however, the “nativist” *kokugaku* scholars reacted against this “Chinese hierarchy” and, in fact, tried to invert it, placing *waka* and *monogatari* on the top. But they were prophets more than realists and, as Shirane points out, it was not until about a century later, with the rise of modern nationalism after Japan’s opening to the West, with the new emphasis on “national language” and “national literature”, and with the defeat of China in the 1890s, that the “Chinese hierarchy” was finally overturned. What followed was nothing less than a “rearrangement” of the whole pre-modern canon according to modern notions of what constituted “literature”: imaginative literature, for instance, was now separated from history, religion, political science and philosophy. Most conspicuously, there was a sudden rise in the status of fiction under European influence, and this resulted in a higher evaluation of works such as *Taketori monogatari*, Japan’s “first novel”, and the fiction of Saikaku. The greatest of all Japanese fictional works, the *Tale of Genji*, which had been previously valued as a kind of handbook for poetry, was now “reread” as both a “realistic” and a “psychological” novel. Shirane relates this mid-Meiji exercise in canon reformation directly to the general Meiji project of modernization and nation-building: “The construction of a

national literature and of a national language was critical to the formation of a strong nation-state, particularly in the face of powerful Western nations, which represented a model for modernization..." (14). Following the "evolutionary, Enlightenment model of history", the new canon "stressed progress across time", favouring medieval and Tokugawa texts over Heian ones, and treating the aristocratic literature of the earlier periods and the popular literature of the medieval and Tokugawa periods as "part of a single national literature" (14). In short, the Meiji government was into canon-making as much as it was into cannon-making.

But there were ancient precedents for this too, as the first two chapters of the book show. The earliest surviving works of Japanese literature were products of an 8<sup>th</sup> century imperial court that was trying to establish its own kind of "national identity" distinct from that of its civilizational mentor, China. Most important from a political point of view were the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*, 712) and the *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720). As Kōnishi Takamitsu points out in his essay on the process of "constructing imperial mythology", ever since their compilation these two texts have been "constantly reconstructed and reinterpreted for the purpose of enforcing or maintaining the legitimacy of the emperor" (51). After 1868 they were "defined as the cultural foundation of both the folk and the nation" in official government publications such as textbooks. In other words, as Kōnishi writes, they became part of a discourse "constructed by a modern nation-state (*kokumin kokka*) whose ideological underpinning was the emperor system (*tennōsei*)" (51).

What was new in Meiji conceptions of canon, however, was a more inclusive – dare one say more democratic? – sense of nationhood and national identity. Shinada Yoshikazu makes this clear in his essay on the *Man'yōshū*, subtitled "The Invention of a National Poetry Anthology" (that is, of a so-called *kokumin kashū*). Shinada's essay is a fascinating study of how views of the *Man'yōshū* changed over the centuries in accordance with currently fashionable theories, ideologies and worldviews. The prime example may be seen in the contrast between the traditional "aristocratic" view of the work and its modern "democratic" or "populist" counterpart. A recent high school *kokugo* textbook quoted by Shinada presents the now conventional view that: "The poets represented range from emperors to commoners, and the works in the collection are characterized by a simple and moving style" (32). Shinada argues convincingly that none of this is true: the *Man'yōshū* "was actually the product of the ruling class in the ancient period" and this may be seen clearly in the often formal, complex, and allusive style of its poems: "Modern writers consequently could not hide their bewilderment when confronted with *makura-kotoba* (epithets), *jo-kotoba* (prefaces), and other rhetorical techniques of *Man'yōshū* poetry" (36). An illiterate peasant could not have composed such literate poetry, and when the poems are

attributed to such members of the “lower orders” this is merely a literary convention, such as when, for poetic effect, a male court aristocrat adopted the voice of a homesick border guard or of a woman mourning for her lost lover. Indeed, such conventions are common in world literature. But the Meiji establishment was eager to retroactively create a truly “national” literature in the modern sense (embracing all the “people” or *kokumin*): “The poetry of the people was expected, first and foremost, to contribute to the spiritual unification of the nation” (35). Since a modern nation encompassed not merely the aristocracy but, theoretically at least, all of its citizens, the *Man'yōshū* was recast as the supreme poetic incarnation of an ancient Japanese national unity which, of course, had never existed (in the Nara and Heian periods, as the literature of those periods makes clear, aristocrats and commoners were seen as almost distinct human species). Meiji intellectuals longed for a “great national poet” who would have the universal appeal of a Goethe or a Shakespeare: “This was more than a literary ambition: the creation of such a poet was considered an indispensable part of Japan’s efforts to vie with the Western powers” (35). Shinada thus concludes that: “In all likelihood, the perception of the *Man'yōshū* as a national poetry anthology was a form of psychological compensation for the absence of such a modern national poetry” (37).

Other essays collected here include those of Tomi Suzuki on modern literary histories and women’s diary literature, Joshua Mostow on the *Tales of Ise*, Linda Chance on *Tsurezuregusa* and *The Pillow Book*, David Bialock on *The Tale of the Heike*, William Lee on Chikamatsu and dramatic literature in the Meiji period, Kurozumi Makoto on *Kangaku*, and a final essay by Haruo Shirane on curriculum and competing canons. All of these essays are of uniformly high quality, well-argued and rich in historical detail, making this an indispensable reference work for the student of Japanese literary history. The specialist will perhaps not find a great deal here that is completely new, either in terms of theory or of information, but what is new – at least, in English – is to find all this material gathered together in one place, a new synthesis, one might say, that gives a comprehensive overview of the history of Japanese literary canon formation. This is a very useful thing to have and the book will no doubt remain the authoritative work on this subject for many years to come.

As to whether these excellent literary-historical essays convince one of the validity of the “antifoundational” canon theory Shirane propounds in his Introduction, my feelings are more ambivalent. Generally speaking, the notion of “invented tradition” was a useful one when traditions were commonly and uncritically accepted as rock-solid, age-old “givens” or as arising and evolving naturally over many centuries without conscious intervention or manipulation by elite power groups. As with all such ideas or metaphors once they become widely popularized, however, there is always the danger that this once-useful

notion itself becomes too much of an *idée fixe* and is applied too simplistically or indiscriminately to all manner of cultural phenomena, no matter how diverse, hybrid or multifaceted.

In the case of literary canon-making, in particular, there often seems to be a fine line between “inventing,” “creating,” “spontaneous popular acclaim,” and the almost countless other ways in which works are “canonized” – as Shirane himself concedes at one point. As an exception to the now generally accepted view that canons are “the instruments of entrenched interests, reproducing the values or ideology of dominant groups” (15), he points to a more popular type of canon formation such as occurred in the medieval period, when Heian court culture and literary figures were popularized by traveling minstrels, artists and performers (16). In fact, of course, such examples could be multiplied exponentially, because there are, in fact, many other kinds of canon formation, making the power politics subspecies of the “antifoundational” theory of canon formation far too narrow and simplistic.

More important, however, at least for anyone who still cherishes an old-fashioned love of literature, is the fact that these recent “antifoundational” theories are based on a nihilistic view of language and literature, reflecting the general nihilism of post-structuralist thought. The doctrine that “canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission” (to use John Guillory’s words as quoted by Shirane) is part of a general assault on the traditional view that a literary text possesses a certain artistic integrity or autonomy in itself and should be interpreted and valued, as much as possible, on its own terms. After the often-proclaimed “death of the author”, the literary text is now seen as a kind of free-floating semantic agent, a passive or neutral receptor for the “power discourses” of various interest groups, an empty cipher open to any use or interpretation – perhaps even the literary equivalent of a whore whose favours may be cheaply bought by all. Shirane – who, I suspect, is a closet literature-lover himself – seems rather nervous about having let the wolf within the fold, and shies away from adopting such an extreme position: he cautiously acknowledges that a text is not an “empty box”: “Each text implies certain moral or aesthetic values and possesses certain formal characteristics...” (2). No doubt creative writers everywhere will jump for joy on hearing the good news!

At any rate, to return to the more “practical” part of the book, the first obvious fact that emerges clearly from these studies of nine different cases of canon formation is that what we might call the “power politics dimension of canon-making” comes far more into play with some works and writers than with others – exactly as common sense would lead us to expect. As anyone who has made even a cursory study of Japanese literary history knows, power politics had much to do with the creation and canonization of the first two major works of Japanese literature (using the word “literature” in its broadest

sense to include, for instance, historical and religious writing): the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that the *Genji Monogatari* (*Tale of Genji*, circa 1000) was canonized almost in spite of itself – that is, its canonical status as the “supreme work of Japanese literature” often caused great offense to the political and cultural establishment: because it was written by a woman, because of its alleged “immorality”, because of its “mendacious” fictionality (so offensive to orthodox Confucianism), because of its “insulting” or “degrading” references to the imperial family, etc. etc. Indeed, it is unfortunate – and perhaps significant – that, although there are many passing references to the *Genji* here, none of the essays focuses on the question of how such an “unorthodox” work could have attained its status as the most canonical work of Japanese literature – if not, of course, by virtue of its sheer literary genius. Could this rather conspicuous omission be precisely because the *Genji*’s canonical status poses such a serious challenge to the “power politics” theory of canon formation on which this book is supposedly based? Certainly I myself would not be convinced of the universal validity of the theory or of its unqualified applicability to Japanese literature unless the case of the *Genji* were taken thoroughly into account. But, in fact, I do not think that it would be possible to square the two: what the case of the *Genji* clearly shows is that the approbation of the political/cultural establishment is not the *sine qua non* of literary canonization, and that the aesthetic appreciation of fellow writers and of readers in general – including, in this case, generations of powerless female readers – can play a decisive role. In short, the power politics theory of canon formation, while obviously applicable to a limited number of cases, is inaccurate and simplistic when taken as a complete account of what is a diverse and complex process.

In his recent brilliant study of 20<sup>th</sup> century political philosophers, *The Reckless Mind*, Mark Lilla pillories a certain all-too-common type of modern intellectual who seems to find it necessary to adopt narrow, extreme positions on a wide range of issues, positions often as offensive to common humanity as they are to common sense. Some of the still most venerated intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Heidegger and Benjamin to Foucault and Derrida, were among their number, men whose nihilism led them to political folly of the highest order – nothing less than the defense of anti-intellectual, anti-humanistic tyrannies in Germany, the Soviet Union and Iran. Was this the result of their straining after a reputation as “original thinkers”, or perhaps a mere delight in confounding “established opinion”? Or was it simply, and less flatteringly, the result of a rather limited power and range of thought? All this may seem to have nothing to do with the matter at hand, but the fact is that the currently popular theory of “canonicity”, as with other poststructuralist theories, descends directly from this same nihilistic school of thought. By wholeheartedly and unconditionally embracing such theories, perhaps without

even knowing their provenance or thinking through all their implications, humanists are embracing their own death.

This is not to deny that political factors do play a role, sometimes even a decisive role, in the establishment of national literary canons. I doubt that this would come as news to anyone who has studied literary history. But to reduce literary canon formation to a mere exercise in power politics is to deny the power of literature itself, a mysterious living power that can sway whole nations without any help from bureaucrats or politicians. In our own tradition, for instance, it would be absurd to claim that Shakespeare owes his canonical status merely to the fact that he was anointed by the ruling powers as “England’s national bard”. Shakespeare’s greatness as a poet, his unparalleled mastery of the English language, is obvious to any reader whose ears are not made of wood. In fact, looking at the historical record, I would say that Shakespeare was first “canonized” by his fellow writers (remember Ben Jonson’s “not for an age, but for all time”), then by generations of readers and theatre-goers, and only much later (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was he made into a “national institution” by the British establishment. In the Japanese context, much the same could be said of Murasaki Shikibu – she was “canonized” by female admirers and by fellow writers long before she was adopted as a national icon by the male political establishment. Of course, it is true that in Japan the political and literary establishments sometimes closely coincided, but not always so (in recent times, for instance, one might contrast the Meiji and Taishō periods in this respect). Some major figures in Japanese literature were definite political outsiders.

In the end, of course, it also depends on what one means by a “literary canon”. If one defines it narrowly as, for instance: “those texts chosen by governments to exemplify the national culture, especially as part of educational curricula”, then the “new canon theory” will obviously hold up quite well. But I doubt that many literature-lovers would be satisfied with such a narrow definition. There is another alternative, that of all those “common readers” who make up their own minds, as Virginia Woolf once urged them to do:

After all, what laws can be laid down about books? The battle of Waterloo was certainly fought on a certain day; but is *Hamlet* a better play than *Lear*? Nobody can say. Each must decide that question for himself. To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf 1932: “How Should One Read a Book?”, in *The Common Reader, Second Series*. London.