

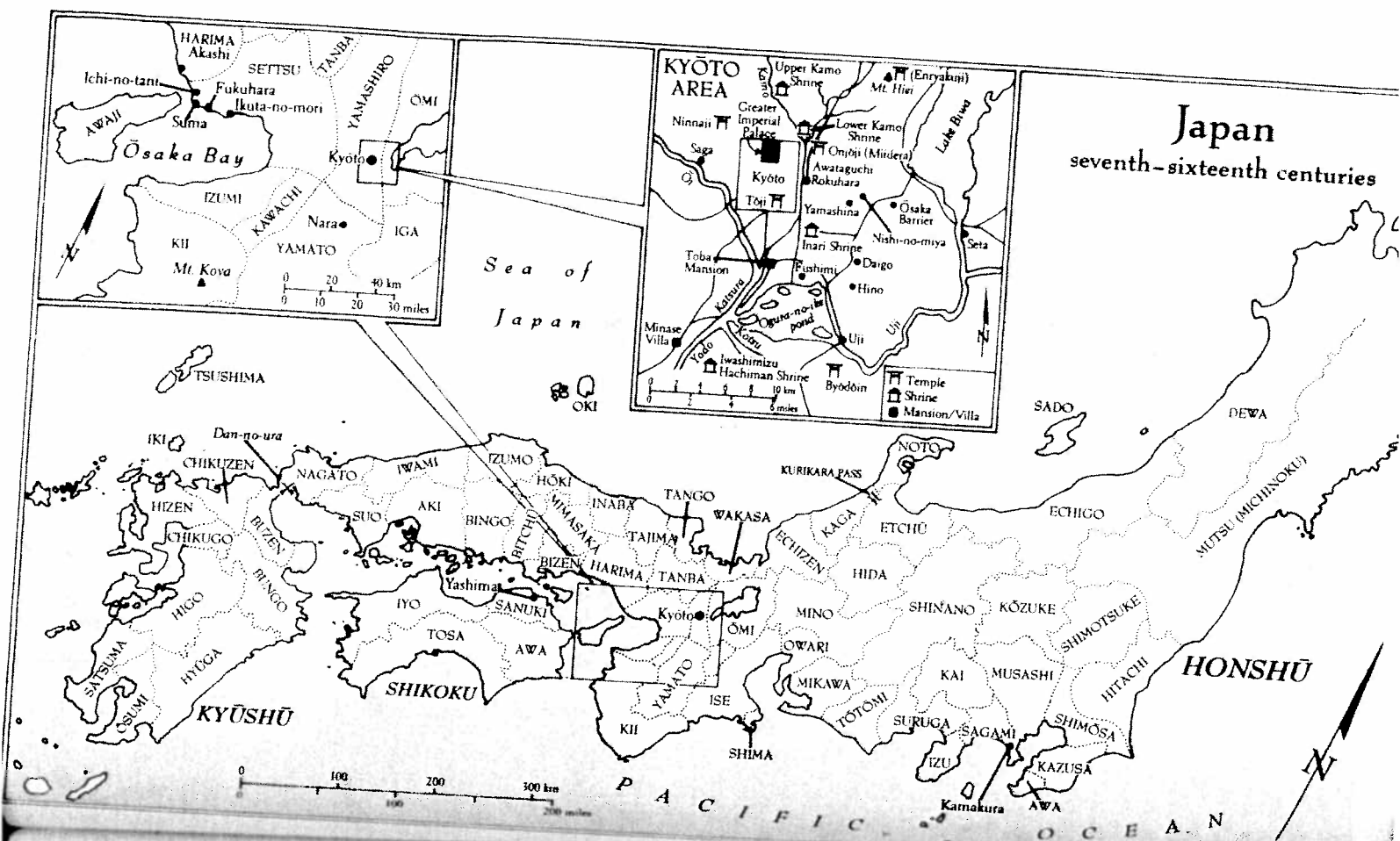
The Golden Age of Japanese Culture

Japan's economy, though weakened considerably in recent years, is one of the miracles of modern times. The material fortunes and technological output of Japan impinge so forcefully on our lives today, however, that they tend to crowd out all other considerations of Japan. Due in part to the barrier of language and, for much of history, a degree of geographical isolation, it is less well known that Japan has also produced one of the world's richest cultures. The first novel was written in Japan almost a thousand years ago. *The Tale of Genji* is a work that can still stand beside the finest accomplishments in fiction. One of poetry's most evocative and influential forms, *haiku*—a flash of insight expressed in a sliver of verse—is also a Japanese creation. Japanese woodblock prints had a profound influence on the French Impressionists, and the design of the traditional Japanese house, when discovered by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others in the twentieth century, helped determine the course of modern architecture.

Yet despite Japan's cultural achievements and their worldwide impact, two clichés haunt Western attitudes toward Japan. The first is that Japan is a small country with a homogeneous population. Japan is small only in one sense. The total land mass of the Japanese archipelago, which consists of four principal islands plus some thousand smaller ones, altogether would not fill the state of California. The gross domestic product, on the other hand, is the third largest in the world, and Japan has the tenth highest population—127 million people—in the world. A common myth about these 127 million people (and a myth to which the Japanese themselves subscribe) is that they constitute a singularly homogeneous group, one "tribe" moving in lockstep. Although Japan may lack the racial and ethnic diversity of a country like the United States, by no means are its citizens all cast from the same mold. As the selections printed here demonstrate, the Japanese speak with many voices, and the weight of their cultural output down through the centuries makes their voices anything but small.

The second stereotype is that Japan is a nation of imitators. This commonplace derives from the fact that it has been Japan's peculiar destiny to have lived at the edge of two great and contrasting traditions—Chinese civilization from the sixth century until the mid-nineteenth and Western modernity thereafter—always managing to accommodate influence while retaining the stamp of its own identity. Far from being a cultural parasite, Japan has demonstrated a genius for knowing when and what to learn back and let someone else invent their culture for them. The same streak of perfectionism that defined Japanese quality control in business seems to have compelled Japan to improve perpetually on the original, whether it be Confucian theories of government or Henry Ford's assembly line. Nor should we let this agility as a cultural transformer obscure Japan's own creativity. The tea ceremony, the multicolor woodblock print, *kabuki*, *haiku*, and *sumo* all spring from native soil.

Yet in the sweep of history this is a newcomer, and twice in its existence Japan has found itself having to catch up. While the empires of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt rose and fell and the civilizations of Greece, India, and China came to flower,



the inhabitants of the Japanese islands remained hunters and gatherers. Their ancestors probably migrated to Japan in several waves, some from the Asian continent and others from the islands to the south. In the third century B.C.E. a new influx brought rice cultivation, and the Japanese exchanged a nomadic way of life for an agricultural one; they settled villages in the miniature plains nestled between the mountains and the sea. But the wanderers' past left its mark on Japanese civilization: an ingrained sense of the impermanence of things; an acute awareness of the changes brought by the seasons; a taste for the spare, the unrefined; the natural—even when prodigious artifice would sometimes be required to produce something "natural."

The new techniques of cultivating wet rice, one of the world's most labor-intensive crops, taught the Japanese people economy in the use of space and the advantages of cooperation. The latter, in turn, gave rise to the long-standing ideal in Japan that it is best to submit individual will to the greater needs of the group—the origin, perhaps, of the notion that the Japanese form a homogeneous and harmonious whole. This was no more true in 300 A.C.E. than it is today; for along with agriculture came bronze and iron; along with metallurgy came weapons; and with weapons, war. In other words, very early on another trait of Japanese culture surfaced: rule by warrior elites, precursors of the *samurai*. A class of martial aristocrats competed for power over the thickly settled countryside of the southern and central islands, until one clan succeeded in asserting its pre-dominance, thereby establishing the imperial line.

The new governors quickly imported the superior fruits of Chinese civilization, which, by the seventh and eighth centuries, represented the most powerful, most advanced, and best administered country in the world. Having consolidated their hold over rival clans, the fledgling rulers claimed authority by absorbing Chinese theories of sovereignty and a centralized state, along with the economic and political apparatus—land surveys, districting, taxation, law codes, and bureaucratic management—to make their bold ambition work.

In many ways, the Japanese succeeded, though the political history of premodern Japan is ultimately the story of how the Chinese model proved a poor fit. It was a system that has been described by historians as a form of agricultural communism, with land divided equally among the population (and taxed uniformly) to ensure maximum returns. China's theory of government was profoundly egalitarian. The emperor reigned as an absolute sovereign, but his administrators were chosen on the basis of ability through an examination system that not only emphasized learning but fostered a true meritocracy. The emperor's bureaucrats thus provided the talent and diversity to help him rule impartially.

But the temperament and earliest traditions of the Japanese inclined them in a very different direction. Kinship ties from tribal times persisted in the emphasis of family and lineage, so that when Japan decided to adapt the Chinese model of bureaucracy, administrative positions went as a matter of course to those of good pedigree. There was no examination or open competition, because government was the right of the aristocracy. A system based on family connections rather than ability may strike us as unfair; it is also inherently unstable. Family fortunes wax and wane, and therein lies not only the formula for the political, economic, and military vicissitudes of premodern Japanese history but also the subject for much of Japan's best literature.

Life in premodern Japan, indeed the earthly realm, was seen as transitory, almost a dream. This was a central teaching of Buddhism, which Japan committed to memory during its Chinese tutelage. Buddhism had an exorbitant impact on Japanese civilization and is the best example of how much more enduring were some of the intellectual, artistic, and material influences that crossed the China Sea along with statecraft. The new religion was obviously congenial to the Japanese mind. While it is true that the native faith, Shinto, was little more than an amorphous and naïve belief in the protective or baneful effect of supernatural powers—local divinities and the mythical creators of Japan—completely lacking in creed, scripture, or a devel-

oped metaphysic, these deficiencies alone do not account for the success of Buddhism among the Japanese. In a country where earthquakes and typhoons are common occurrences and where people lived close to nature in all its changing aspects, the doctrine of universal impermanence spoke to Japanese experience. More important, Buddhism brought meaning to that discordant experience. Precisely because human existence is fleeting and illusory, life is but dissatisfaction. So long as one clings to the things of this world, one is bound to suffer. Buddhism offered hope of escape, however, because it taught that we all hold the possibility of Buddhahood within us. To realize this Buddha nature and end the painful cycle of rebirth into worlds of continued suffering, we have only to stop our grasping.

Here is the kernel of a great literature. It would sprout in Japan as luxuriantly as anywhere Buddhism ever touched: a literature that takes as its main ambition to plumb the depths of longing. If the Japanese have not quite been the world's metaphysicians, they have been thinkers of another kind. Like the ancient Romans, the Japanese have always been a profoundly practical people. While they may never have distinguished themselves in abstract speculation, through art and literature rather than philosophy they have addressed, albeit more obliquely, the large questions of life: the nature of emotional attachment, the human need for affection, the clash between passion and reason, the curse of worldly ambition, the demon of the self, what courage means, what beauty is, where wisdom lies, the weight of the past, the true meaning of time.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

Genji: <i>gen-jee</i>	kabuki: <i>kah-poo-kee</i>
haiku: <i>hai-koo</i>	samurai: <i>sah-moo-rai</i>
Heike: <i>hey-ke</i>	sumô: <i>soo-moh</i>

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
712 <i>A Record of Ancient Matters</i>, a mythic history legitimizing early Japanese rulers who commissioned it ca. 759 <i>The Manyōshū</i>, an anthology of over forty-five hundred poems ca. 890 <i>The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter</i>, first extant work of Japanese fiction ca. 905 <i>The Kokinshū</i>, first imperially commissioned poetry anthology mid-10th century <i>Tales of Ise</i>, 125 brief lyrical episodes giving fictional context to one or more poems; influenced <i>The Tale of Genji</i> early 11th century <i>The Tale of Genji</i> (Murasaki Shikibu), considered world's first novel • <i>The Pillow Book</i> (Sei Shōnagon), collection of random observations on love, life at court, and human nature	4th–6th centuries Clans ally to form Yamato, precursor of Japanese state 552 Buddhism introduced into Japan 600 Chinese and Korean artisans settle in Japan 645 Taika Reforms redistribute land and place imperial house in control of Japan 710–784 Nara period: capital established at Nara in time of first great intellectual and cultural achievement 794–1185 Heian period: cultural life continues to flourish as capital moves to Heian (present-day Kyoto) 800 Charlemagne crowned, inaugurating Holy Roman empire 9th century Japanese syllabary is developed from Chinese characters
	1180–85 Genpei Wars end aristocratic monopoly of power, inspiring <i>The Tale of the Heike</i> 1185–1333 Kamakura period: political center moves east to Kamakura with rise of warrior elite known as <i>samurai</i>

Boldface titles indicate works in the anthology.

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1206 <i>The New Kokinshū</i>, the eighth imperial anthology of poetry 13th–14th centuries <i>The Tale of the Heike</i>, an account of the Genpei Wars, which led to aristocracy's loss of wealth and political power 1330s <i>Essays in Idleness</i> (Yoshida Kenkō), discursive observations revolving around aesthetic issues 14th–6th centuries <i>Nō</i> drama flourishes: Zeami Motokyo's <i>Atsumori</i> and <i>Haku Rakuten</i>, and <i>Dōjōji</i> by Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu 15th century Linked poetry, composed by several poets, develops from entertainment into favored literary form 1463 <i>Murmured Conversations</i> (Shinkei), a treatise on principles of linked poetry 1488 <i>Three Poets at Minase</i>, a hundred-verse sequence by Sōgi, Shōhaku, and Sōchō, epitomizes linked-poetry tradition	1215 Magna Carta grants rights to "free men" of England 1271–95 Marco Polo journeys to China, opening trade routes and cultural ties between Europe and east Asia 1338–1573 Muromachi period: culture flourishes despite social upheaval, reflected in austere, introspective character of the arts 15th century Rise of Zen Buddhism
	1519 Magellan circumnavigates globe, proving earth is round and revealing the Americas as a new world 1543 Portuguese land in Japan, bringing firearms and Christianity 1573–1600 Momoyama period: civil war leads to unification of Japan 1597 Japanese build printing press with wooden movable type after Korean model in cast metal

THE MANYŌSHŪ eighth century

The first monument of Japanese literature, and some would say its greatest, is a large collection of poetry whose range, complexity, and force still speak to us, more than one thousand years later, of the exuberance of a people experiencing literacy and cultural animation for the first time. Known as *The Manyōshū* (The Collection of Ten thousand leaves), this earliest extant collection of Japanese poetry appears to have been intended as an anthology of anthologies. The compilers repeatedly refer to older anthologies, no longer existing, from which they have culled their selections. Furthermore, the "leaves" of the title refer not only to the poems but to future generations of readers, because, by tradition, the character for *leaf* also meant "age," or "generation." The anthologizers were proclaiming, then, that this "collection of ten thousand poems" (4,516 to be precise) was to serve as a "collection for ten thousand ages."

Such a claim might seem the height of audacity, given the circumstances. At the time that the last specifically dated poem in the collection was completed in 759, Japan had only recently emerged from a primitive preliterate past. A loose confederation of competing clans, who drew their wealth from the cultivation of rice and whose principal cultural accomplishment was the erection of enormous burial mounds equipped with clay statuary, had remade itself into a society with a national identity, a ruling imperial family, an elaborate government administration, a complex system of religious beliefs, a command of letters, and the other accoutrements of civilization.

All this had been realized within the span of a mere century or two, as Japan worked frenetically to catch up with the world's exemplar of cultural sophistication: China. Once the Japanese comprehended the chasm separating them from this much older civilization, which by every standard—economic, political, and philosophical—threw their unseasoned situation into bold relief, national ambition and competitive pride propelled a stunning process of assimilation. Where before there had been paddy fields and simple thatched-roof shrines intended to placate spirits residing in the rivers and mountains of the vicinity, now there were vast road networks, irrigation works, ports, and courier service and, in the capital, a hierarchy of court ranks, fine silks and brocades, and lacquered pagodas whose rooftops soared like the wings of a great bird gliding in mid-flight. These were all visible signs of the material progress Japan had accomplished as the diligent student of China.

But perhaps the most fateful decision that the Japanese made in their importation of Chinese culture was the bending of the Chinese writing system to the needs of their own very different language. The Chinese script, known as characters, had originated as a system of pictograms, evolving over time to incorporate pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic elements. Because it was designed solely to record the Chinese language and lacked the pliancy of a phonetic writing system—an alphabet or syllabary—the Chinese script required cumbersome manipulation before it could serve to record another language.

That the Japanese chose to borrow rather than invent a writing system makes them no different from most other peoples. The Greek alphabet, for example, is but a mutation of the Phoenician script, and the Roman alphabet merely the Greek slightly modified. What may set the Japanese apart, however (and would later become a cliché), is the ingenuity of their adaptation. The poems of *The Manyōshū* were recorded using Chinese characters in three different ways: for meaning, for sound when read in Chinese, and for sound when read in Japanese. The character denoting "person," for instance, could naturally be used for its semantic value when the poet

wanted to write the word *person*. But it could also be used to approximate the sound of its original Chinese pronunciation, *jen*, which Japanese phonology rendered *jin*, or *min*. Or it could be used in an altogether different way. Because the Japanese word for "person" is *hito*, the character could represent that native sound in another word. For example, Hitomaro, the name of the first of the poets in the selections printed here, came to be written with the "person" character signifying the "Hito" element. The sheer perversity of this system (for there were thousands of Chinese characters to be mastered and the number had then to be multiplied by three) is a testament to the overwhelming desire of the Japanese people of the seventh and eighth centuries to express their new experiences through the written word.

Indeed the range of experience the early poets chronicled is one of the qualities that later generations of Japanese would prize in *The Manyōshū*. Other qualities are its passion and sincerity, together with an innocence, vigor, and seeming artlessness that stand in marked contrast to the controlled, more self-conscious polish that would define Japanese poetry throughout the subsequent classical era. In the age of *The Manyōshū*, the aristocratic customs of the court had yet to solidify into the weight of convention. And the cultural situation in Japan was still fluid enough that the aristocracy did not yet dominate.

In fact, one finds a surprising number of poems in *The Manyōshū* by people completely outside court circles, whose literacy itself is surprising. The anonymous poems in the collection, nearly two thousand, far outnumber those by any of the known poets. There are rustic poems that tell of life in the wilderness of the eastern frontier, poems purportedly by fishers, poems recording local dialects, farewell poems by military conscripts, and even poems by travelers to Korea. Of course, one must allow for the possibility that aristocrats chose to romanticize rustic life, and no doubt some of the poems in a common voice are a reworking of folk elements. Nonetheless, in many cases sufficient internal evidence remains to convince scholars that a substantial number of the anonymous poems are the product of the ordinary citizen.

Authorship, however, is only one indication of the breadth of *The Manyōshū*. Those poets who came from the privileged class and whose names we do know also ranged widely in their chosen topics. Kakinomoto Hitomaro* (flourished ca. 680–700), the undisputed master of the collection, captures the profound sadness of parting, the warrior's bravery, the shock of sudden death, the pageantry of the imperial institution, the burdens of travel, and the mysteries of the human fate. The three sets of poems included here by Hitomaro are representative of his genius. In the first he broods on the passing of time and the evanescence of worldly glory as he views the ruins of the ancient capital. In the second he laments the loneliness of parting from his wife. He depicts their union through the sensual imagery of stems of "sleek seaweed" that once "swayed toward" each other and intertwined but after too few nights have been sundered; the seaweed now grows alone "on the desolate shore."

Like so many of his best poems, it is a highly visual presentation. When the poet describes looking back through the falling leaves for a final glimpse of his wife, not only do we clearly see the sad autumn scene but we can picture the poet's wife disappearing before his (and our) eyes:

And so I look back,
still thinking of her . . .
but in the storm
of fallen scarlet leaves
on Mount Watari.

* Names are given in the Japanese order, with surname first.

crossed as on
a great ship,
I cannot make out the sleeves
she waves in farewell.
For she, alas,
is slowly hidden
like the moon
in its crossing
between the clouds.

The same visual force is apparent in the third set of poems by Hitomaro, perhaps his most famous, inspired by the sight of a dead man lying amid the rocks on the forsaken shore of a distant island. Having traveled there through a storm that nearly cost him his own life, Hitomaro understandably identifies with the fate of the dead man. Through his rich use of imagistic language deployed in the lyric equivalent of narration, he makes us identify as well. In poems like these, Hitomaro perfected the techniques of the earliest Japanese poetry, still marked by the formulaic style of an oral tradition, and raised them to a poetry of high artistry.

What constituted that artistry is deceptively simple. Because the sound system of Japanese employs no stress accent, each syllable is pronounced with virtually equal emphasis, and the forms of meter based on stress that we associate with English poetry do not occur. Nor does rhyme figure in Japanese prosody. Most syllables consist of a single vowel or a consonant (or consonant cluster) followed by a vowel. With only five vowel sounds, given Japanese word structure, a poetry based on rhyme would be akin, as Robert Frost once said of free verse, to playing tennis without a net. Instead, Japanese poetry depended from its inception on the rhythm created by alternating phrases of long and short syllable counts. Japan's most archaic songs employ this pattern of alternation, which originally varied from combinations of phrases with four syllables paired with those of six to alternations of phrases of five syllables with those of three. Eventually, by the mid-seventh century the accepted pattern became an alternation of five and seven syllables, establishing a rhythm that would reign until the modern day.

The poets of *The Man'yōshū* compose in two principal forms. The *chōka*, or long poem, consists of an indeterminate number of lines of alternating five- and seven-syllable phrases, culminating in a couplet of two seven-syllable phrases. The *tanka*, or short poem, is identical in form to the last five lines of a *chōka*—that is, it is a thirty-one-syllable poem arranged in lines whose syllable counts are 5, 7, 5, 7, 7.

The long poems in *The Man'yōshū* are by far the rarest, and in fact the *chōka* disappears as a viable poetic form after *The Man'yōshū*. Approximately 4,200 of the 4,516 poems in the collection are *tanka*. Even most of the *chōka* have satellite *tanka* known as "envoys" that serve as a summing up or expand an imagistic or emotive theme from the original *chōka* to a fuller, still more lyrical realization.

Despite their numerical inferiority within the *The Man'yōshū* the longer poems by Hitomaro and others are what many readers remember best. No doubt their very scarcity makes them stand out against the subsequent history of a more confined form of poetry. At the same time, this mingling of *chōka* and *tanka* is yet another indication of the anthology's unusual range.

Among the finest *tanka* in the collection are the ironic poems in praise of wine by Ōtomo Tabito (665–731). Unlike Hitomaro, of whose extraliterary life we unfortunately know nothing, Tabito is a political figure with a well-documented government career. His affection for Chinese literature also sets him apart from Hitomaro, and his bibulous poems printed here are an excellent example of his expert handling of Chinese themes.

Like his friend Tabito, Yamamoue Okura (660–ca. 733), author of the last two sets of poems included here, was a devotee of Chinese culture. But the stances the two poets assume are completely different. If Tabito speaks as the Taoist epicure detached from the stress of life, Okura is the old Confucian gentleman, moralistic, with a strong sense of outrage at the ills of society. His poems on the impermanence of life treat a theme that had already become familiar in Japanese literature, but his poems on poverty depart radically from the norm. They become somewhat less radical, it is true, when we compare them with Chinese treatments of social injustice. Still, Okura's humble, earthy style, the vigor of his language, his genuine compassion, and the humorous, loving voice that breaks through his austere pose are all distinctive.

Owing to its amazing variety, *The Man'yōshū* has been all things to all readers. To some, it is proof that the earliest Japanese literature is derivative. For others, it is the repository of the essential Japanese identity: wholehearted, sincere, robust, and unaffected. It is important, however, to keep perspective. Susceptibility to influence does not preclude creative invention, and the Chinese example can best be viewed as a fertilizing one. Furthermore, a careful reading of *The Man'yōshū* reveals a work of considerable complexity, in which confidence in the artistic effect that language creates has overshadowed preliterate belief in the sheer incantatory power of words. Finally, it is one of the ironies of literary history that in the later generations invoked in the very title of the collection—for whom the poetic art was intended to endure—poetry was appropriated as the exclusive property of one group, the aristocracy. Compared with the later poetry of Japan's classical age, *The Man'yōshū*, in its diverse forms and multiplicity of voices, can rightly be viewed as the mirror of an entire nation.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

<i>chōka: choh-kah</i>	Ōtomo Tabito: oh-toh-moh tah-bee-toh
<i>Dazafu: dah-zai-foo</i>	Ōsu: oh-tso
<i>Iwami: ee-uah-mee</i>	Samine: sah-mee-me
<i>Izanagi: ee-zah-nah-gee</i>	Sanuki: sah-noo-kee
<i>Izanami: ee-zah-nah-mee</i>	Sasanami: sah-sah-nah-mee
<i>Jimmu: jeen-moo</i>	Shikoku: shee-koh-ku
<i>Kakinomoto Hitomaro: kah-kee-noh-moh-toh hee-toh-mah-roh</i>	<i>tanka: tah-n-kah</i>
<i>Kashwara: kah-shee-uah-rah</i>	Unebi: oo-ne-bee
<i>Kyūshū: kyoo-shoo</i>	Watari: uah-tah-ree
<i>Man'yōshū: mah-n'yoh-shoo</i>	Yamamoue Okura: yah-mah-noh-oo-e
<i>Ōmi: oh-mee</i>	oh-ko-rah
	Yamato: yah-mah-toh

FROM THE MANYŌSHŪ¹

29-31

*Poem written by Kakinomoto Hitomaro when he passed the ruined
capital at Ōmi²*

Since the reign of the Master of the Sun³
at Kashiwara by Unebi Mountain,
where the maidens
wear strands of jewels,
all gods who have been born
have ruled the realm under heaven,
each following each
like generations of the spruce,
in Yamato⁴
that spreads to the sky.

What was in his mind
that he would leave it
and cross beyond the hills of Nara,
beautiful in blue earth?

Though a barbarous place
at the far reach of the heavens,
here in the land of Ōmi
where the waters race on stone,
at the Ōtsu Palace
in Sasanami

by the rippling waves,
the Emperor, divine Prince,
ruled the realm under heaven.

Though I hear
this was the great palace,
though they tell me
here were the mighty halls,
now it is rank with spring grasses.
Mist rises, and the spring sun is dimmed.
Gazing on the ruins of the great palace,
its walls once thick with wood and stone,
I am filled with sorrow.

ENVOYS

Cape Kara in Shiga
at Sasanami
by the rippling waves.

1. All selections translated by and with notes adapted from Ian Hideo Levy. 2. Because of the ancient Japanese belief that death polluted a dwelling, when the sovereign died it was customary for his successor to take up residence in a new palace. The capital shifted from place to place among the central provinces, until an edict in 646 called for the establishment of a permanent center of government. 3. Emperor Jōmu, in legend the founding sovereign of Japan, credited with subduing rival chieftains to create the first Japanese state. 4. An archaic name for Japan, which originally referred to the area around present Nara.

*Poem written by Kakinomoto Hitomaro when he parted from his wife in
the land of Iwami and came up to the capital*

135-137

you are as before, but I
wait for courtiers' boats in vain.
Waters, you are quiet
in deep bends of Shiga's lake
at Sasanami
by the rippling waves,
but never again may I
meet the men of ancient times.

At Cape Kara

on the Sea of Iwami,

where the vines

crawl on the rocks,

rockweed of the deep

grows on the reefs

and sleek seaweed

grows on the desolate shore.

As deeply do I

think of my wife

who swayed toward me in sleep

like the lithe seaweed.

Yet few were the nights

we had slept together

before we were parted

like crawling vines uncurled.

And so I look back,

still thinking of her

with painful heart,

this clench of inner flesh,

but in the storm

of fallen scarlet leaves

on Mount Watari,¹

crossed as on

a great ship,

I cannot make out the sleeves

she waves in farewell.

For she, alas,

is slowly hidden

like the moon

in its crossing

between the clouds

1. *Watari* means "crossing"; thus the leaves fall at the very spot where the poet might have caught one last glimpse of his wife.

over Yagami Mountain
just as the evening sun
coursing through the heavens
has begun to glow,
and even I
who thought I was a brave man
find the sleeves
of my well-woven robe
drenched with tears.

ENVOYS

The quick gallop
of my dapple-blue steed
races me to the clouds,
passing far away
from where my wife dwells.

O scarlet leaves
falling on the autumn mountainside:
stop, for a while, the storm
your strewing makes, that I might glimpse
the place where my wife dwells.

220-222

*Poem written by Kakinomoto Hitomaro upon seeing a dead man lying
among the rocks on the island of Samine in Sanuki*

The land of Sanuki,¹
fine in sleek seaweed:
is it for the beauty of the land
that we do not tire
to gaze upon it?
Is it for its divinity
that we deem it most noble?
Eternally flourishing,
with the heavens
and the earth,
with the sun
and the moon,
the very face of a god—
so it has come down
through the ages.

Casting off
from Naka harbor,
we came rowing.
Then tide winds

blew through the clouds;
on the offing
we saw the rustled waves,
on the strand
we saw the roaring crests.
Fearing the whale-hunted seas,
our ship plunged through—
we bent those oars!
Many were the islands
near and far,
but we beached on Samine—
beautiful its name—
and built a shelter
on the rugged shore.

Looking around,
we saw you
lying there
on a jagged bed of stones,
the beach
for your finely woven pillow,
by the breakers' roar.

If I knew your home,
I would go and tell them.
If your wife knew,
she would come and seek you out.
But she does not even know the road,
straight as a jade spear.
Does she not wait for you,
worrying and longing,
your beloved wife?

ENVOYS

If your wife were here,
she would gather and feed you
the starwort that grows
on the Sami hillsides,
but is its season not past?
Making a finely woven pillow
of the rocky shore
where waves from the offing
draw near,
you, who sleep there!

1. In Japan's creation myth Sanuki (part of the island now called Shikoku) was one of the first places to be formed by the union of the gods Izanagi and Izanami.

338-350

*Thirteen poems in praise of wine by Lord Ōtomo Tabito, the Commander of the Dazaifu*¹

Rather than engaging
in useless worries,
it's better to down a cup
of raw wine.

Great sages of the past
gave the name of "sage"² to wine.
How well they spoke!

What the Seven Wise Men³
of ancient times
wanted, it seems,
was wine.

Rather than making pronouncements
with an air of wisdom,
it's better to down the wine
and sob drunken tears.

What is most noble,
beyond all words
and beyond all deeds,
is wine.

Rather than be half-heartedly human,
I wish I could be a jug of wine
and be soaked in it!

How ugly!
those men who,
with airs of wisdom,
refuse to drink wine.
Take a good look,
and they resemble apes.

How could even
a priceless treasure
be better than a cup
of raw wine?

How could even a gem
that glitters in the night
be as good as drinking wine
and cleansing the heart?

1. Government headquarters in Kyūshū, southernmost of the four main islands of Japan, an important outpost for regulating contacts with China and Korea. In Tabito's time the flourishing city was nicknamed "the distant capital." 2. So called by those who drank it secretly during the brief time in ancient China when wine was prohibited by the emperor. 3. The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove of 3rd-century China, a Taoist coterie of wealthy dissidents who expressed their social and political disaffection by withdrawing into a kind of intellectual hedonism, given over to tipping, poetastering, and philosophical debate. One of the sages set the style for the group by employing an attendant who carried a wine jug in one hand to quench his master's thirst and a spade in the other to bury him if he fell dead.

Here in this life,
on these roads of pleasure,
it is fun to sob drunken tears.

As long as I have fun
in this life,
let me be an insect or a bird
in the next.⁴

Since all who live
must finally die,
let's have fun
while we're still alive.

Smug and silent airs of wisdom
are still not as good
as downing a cup of wine
and sobbing drunken tears.

804-805¹*Poem sorrowing on the impermanence of life in this world*

PREFACE

Easy to gather and difficult to dispel are the eight great hardships.² Difficult to fully enjoy and easy to expend are the pleasures of life's century span. So the ancients lamented, and so today our grief finds the same cause. Therefore I have composed a poem, and with it hope to dispel the sorrow of my black hair marked with white. My poem:

Our helplessness in this life
is like the streaming away
of the months and years.

Again and again
misfortune tracks us down
and assaults us with a hundred ills.

We cannot hold time
in its blossoming:
when young girls,
to be maidens,
wrapped Chinese jewels
around their wrists
and, hand in hand
with companions of their age,
must once have played.
When has frost fallen
on hair as black

4. The poet adheres to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation, in which present deeds determine one's future life. 1. By Yamanoue Ōkura. 2. In Buddhism, birth, old age, sickness, death, separation, anger, coveting, and the so-called pain of five passions—the suffering derived from one's attachment to the five elemental aggregates of which the body, mind, and environment are formed (perception, conception, volition, consciousness, and form).

as the guts of river snails?
From where do wrinkles come
to crease those crimson faces?
We have let time go.

Once strong young men,

to be manly,

girt their waists

with great swords

and, tossing saddles

with cloth embroidered

in Yamato patterns

on their red-maned steeds,

mounted and rode for sport—

how could it last forever?

Few were the nights

I pushed apart the wooden doors

that young girls creak open and shut

and, groping to their side,

slept arm in jewelled arm,

arm in truly jewelled arm!

But now I walk

with a cane gripped in my hand

and propped against my waist.

Going this way,

I am despised.

Going that way,

I am hated.

Such, it seems,

is the fate of old men.

Though I regret the passing

of my life,

that swelled with spirit,

there is nothing I can do.

ENVOY

Like the unchanging cliffs,
I would remain just as I am.
But I am living in this world
and cannot hold time back.

892-893¹

Dialog of the Destitute

"On nights when rain falls,
mixed with wind,
on nights when snow falls,
mixed with rain,

I am cold
And the cold.

leaves me helpless:

I lick black lumps of salt

and suck up melted dregs of *sake*.²

Coughing and sniffling,

I smooth my uncertain wisps

of beard.

I am proud—

I know no man

is better than me.

But I am cold.

I pull up my hempen nightclothes

and throw on every scrap

of cloth shirt that I own.

But the night is cold.

And I wonder how a man like you,

even poorer than myself,

with his father and mother

starving and freezing,

with his wife and children

begging and begging

through their tears,

can get through the world alive

at times like this."

"Wide, they say,

are heaven and earth—

but have they shrunk for me?

Bright, they say,

are the sun and moon—

but do they refuse to shine for me?

Is it thus for all men,

or for me alone?³

Above all, I was born human,³

I too toil for my keep—

as much as the next man—

yet on my shoulders hangs

a cloth shirt

not even lined with cotton,

these tattered rags

thin as strips of seaweed.

In my groveling hut,

my tilting hut,

sleeping on straw

cut and spread right on the ground,

with my father and mother

huddled at my pillow

and my wife and children

1. By Yamahiroe Okura.

2. A brewed alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice. 3. In the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation one could not achieve enlightenment, thereby escaping the cyclical chain of rebirth, without first attaining the human level. In this, at least, he is fortunate.

huddled at my feet,

I grieve and lament.

Not a spark rises in the stove,

and in the pot

a spider has drawn its web.

I have forgotten

what it is to cook rice!

As I lie here,

a thin cry tearing from my throat—

a tiger thrush's

moan—

then, as they say,

to slice the ends

of a thing already too short,

to our rough bed

comes the scream of the villman

with his tax collecting

whip.

Is it so helpless and desperate,

the way of life in this world?"

ENVOY

I find this world

a hard and shameful place.

But I cannot fly away—

I am not a bird.

MURASAKI SHIKIBU

ca. 973–1016

The Tale of Genji is the undisputed masterpiece of Japanese prose and the first great novel in the history of world literature. It was written in the early eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, a woman of the lower reaches of the aristocracy. Murasaki was the daughter of a provincial governor, but her service as lady-in-waiting to the empress allowed her the most intimate glimpse of the social and political doings of the imperial court. Unlike the fanciful romances that preceded it, *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1001–13) is revered for its psychological insight, capturing a world that, however remote it might eventually become in time, has always retained the sharp authenticity of real life.

Vast in scale and peopled by hundreds of characters, this thousand-page novel has a plot of supreme simplicity. It depicts the lives and loves of a former prince and, following his death, the lives and loves of his descendants. But in a novel in which everything is finely calibrated, things are seldom really simple. To begin with, why is the hero a former prince? Though he is cherished by his father, the emperor, political exigencies force his removal from the imperial line. The family name *Genji* is bestowed on him, along with the sobriquet "the shining one" and generous emolu-

ments. Nonetheless, before the first chapter is even over, the young hero has already lost the most important attribute of a man of his rank: the chance to rule someday as emperor.

Because political concerns were of little interest to the author except implicitly, she is not about to dissect the career of a favorite son as he rises through the ranks of the government. She is interested instead in how one compensates, substitutes, and replaces and in larger issues than worldly success: fate, retribution, sexual attraction, and the emotional depth of human experience.

What begins as the story of a glittering existence darkens with time. The sensitive aristocrat discovers more of life, including failure. Yet this is no ordinary story of age bringing wisdom or of the past repeating itself. As Murasaki augments her tale (which seems to have grown more by accretion than by blueprint), she questions, attenuates, and sometimes undermines the fundamental presumptions of its earlier portions.

By the time *Genji* dies two thirds of the way through the book, a deep pessimism has taken over. We have entered a world diminished, not only because *Genji* is gone but because his survivors are somehow smaller people, flawed fragments of their forebears. Murasaki now follows the hapless lives of *Genji*'s two descendants, but here again things are not as simple as they appear. One of the two possesses the ultimate flaw of inauthenticity. He is only passing as *Genji*'s son, being in fact, the issue of an illicit union between *Genji*'s wife and the son of *Genji*'s best friend. In their different ways, the two scions represent a sad falling off. The real grandson is frivolous and inconsequential, and the putative son is so wracked by neurotic indecision that he has been dubbed world literature's first antihero.

Though the armature supporting this long story lies in the lives of three men, it is fundamentally a work of women's literature. To a degree that would have been the envy of European women writers as recently as Virginia Woolf, Murasaki thrived in a culture where women had the leisure, financial security, and intellectual freedom to become writers of significance. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she wants to write fiction," Virginia Woolf said in 1929. She was lamenting the fact that until the late eighteenth century such favorable conditions were usually wanting and Western literature was the poorer for its slender pantheon of women writers.

The situation in Murasaki's day, courtly Japan of nearly a thousand years earlier, could not have been more different. True, women led a circumscribed existence. The role of a lady was to marry and bear children, and if she came of a suitably good family, she was apt to find herself a pawn in the marriage politics of the imperial court. The most influential family of the time, the Fujiwara, had attained its influence by marrying daughters to emperors, who produced new emperors who could be dominated by their maternal grandfathers. (Murasaki was herself a member of a subsidiary branch of the Fujiwara family.) A noblewoman's days were spent behind curtains and screens, hidden from the world (or from the male world). The verb to see constituted an act of possession and was synonymous with having sexual relations. Proper ladies were not seen casually. Nor did they enjoy the same mobility as men or have careers, except as ladies-in-waiting.

They did, however, have the requisite leisure that Virginia Woolf specified. And they had the income. Although at this time Japan was a polygamous society, women of the aristocracy retained a degree of independence, thanks to a system of marital inheritance, so that a well-born woman was not solely dependent on her husband for financial support.

Most important of all, the women of Murasaki's circle had the intellectual attainments to produce literature. Theirs was an education by default, but it was an education all the same. As is so often the case in early Japanese literature, the issue of language becomes crucial. Despite the new native writing system (described in the headnote "*The Kokinshū*," p. 2161) and the birth of an indigenous Japanese literature,