

Is *Waka* Untranslatable? Medieval Translation Theories on Japanese Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores how medieval Japanese intellectuals developed unique theories on the translation of classical Japanese poetry, *waka*, by examining poetry treatises written by medieval Japanese intellectuals and poets, and considers characteristics of medieval Japanese translation theories by juxtaposing them with modern discourses on the translation of classical Japanese poetry.

First, I argue that medieval poets sought to improve the status of Japanese poetry, thus developing a translation theory that established Japanese poetry as equal to Sinitic poetry. This theory recognizes that both China and Japan have similar and very sophisticated systems of poetics, and claims that both countries birthed them simultaneously and independently of each other.

Second, I will illustrate how a medieval prominent poet, Fujiwara Shunzei, and other medieval poets emphasized a feature distinctive to Japanese poetry: that it is a custom practiced exclusively in Japan.

Third, I will show how medieval poets and intellectuals promoted Japanese poetry as a “softening” of writings in other languages. They argued that Indian and Sinitic poetics were felicitously translated into Japanese, thus concluding that Japanese texts were equivalent to Indian and Sinitic ones. I will demonstrate how this idea of softening works hand in hand with the effort to overcome the Buddhist center/periphery discourse, which locates India at the center of this faith, with China flanking it, and Japan on the far north-eastern margin. Japan finds a way to inch closer to the Buddhist center on textual (if not geographical) grounds.

Lastly, I introduce how medieval intellectuals claimed that Japanese poetry was a manifestation of Buddha’s mantras, bringing the Japanese language closer to the perfect language of Buddha. I will contend that they attempted to establish a worldview centered on Japanese poetry as the manifestation of mantras, which effectively transcends the geographical distances between India and Japan, unifying them as the Buddhist center.

I conclude that the medieval perception that Japanese poetry is translatable showed a sense of belonging to a larger Buddhist community as well as a complexity of communities that medieval people belonged to.

Introduction

This paper explores how medieval⁽¹⁾ Japanese intellectuals developed unique theories on the translation of classical Japanese poetry, *waka*, by examining poetry treatises written by medieval Japanese intellectuals and poets, and considers characteristics of medieval Japanese translation theories by juxtaposing them with modern discourses on translation of classical Japanese poetry.

In his 1938 treatise on translation, the prominent Japanese scholar of English, Nogami Toyochirō (1883-1950), expresses this skepticism that Japanese poetry can be translated into English in phonic terms. He claims that “the tone of Japanese poetry (as well as poetry of any other country) is definitely not translatable into other languages.”⁽²⁾

(1) Following the common periodization shared by contemporary scholars of premodern Japanese literature I use the term “medieval” for the period, which began with the Insei, or cloistered rule, period around 1100-1185 and ended in 1603 when the Tokugawa Shogunate.

(2) Toyochirō Nogami, *Hon'yaku: hon'yaku no riiron to jissai (On Translation: Theory and Practice of Translation)* Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1938.

He drives this point home later in his essay:

In translating any works which include phonetic beauty as a key element, we will never be able to translate the tone (*kakuchō*) into foreign languages. I wonder what can be done about this.⁽³⁾

This is a provocative claim, since Nogami himself was an expert on English literature, and translated works by writers as diverse as William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Bernard Shaw, Jane Austen, and Pierre Loti. (His expertise on Noh theatre is also well-known, and he contributed to scholarship on Noh outside Japan.) Nogami states that “even among Western languages there is a huge gap between classical languages and modern languages. When it comes to translation of Western languages into Japanese, which belong to different language families, the gap between these languages is much larger. Strictly speaking, Japanese doesn’t have the tones or trochaic meters that Western languages have and Japanese poetry doesn’t have trochaic meters or rhyme, which Western poetry possesses. Thus, translation of Western poetry to Japanese can never be adequate.”⁽⁴⁾

In spite of his doubts, Nogami nevertheless seems dedicated to translation, if only in the service of promoting Japanese literature worldwide and with particular caveats:

We should translate with an eye towards raising our status internationally. Although we cannot expect this from all translation works, we can count on some works. The English translation of *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, or *Man’yōshū*, published by the Japan Society for Promotion of Science, is one good example, especially because the translation was sponsored by a public organization.

I agree with the idea that translation of the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves* should be accomplished by the hands of Japanese people. This is not because I align myself with the current tendency of nationalism. I believe that those who are not Japanese will never understand sentiments and peculiarities of expressions inherent to the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*.⁽⁵⁾

These anthologies Nogami mentions contain *waka* from the *Man’yōshū*, or *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, is estimated to be the oldest anthology of Japanese poetry. It was compiled around AD 759 and contains 20 volumes and more than 4,500 *waka* poems.

Nogami introduces two English translations of a *tanka* poem, whose attributed author is a *tennyō*, (heavenly woman), a divine being found in Buddhism. The poem included in *Tango no Kuni Fudoki*, or *Topography of Tango Province* (8th century), an ancient report on culture, geography, and oral tradition from the Tango area of Kyoto.

(The original text)

Ama no hara/ Furisake mireba/ Kasumi tatsu/ Kumoji madoite/ Yukue shirazumo

(Arthur Waley’s translation)

I look into the plains of heaven,
The Cloud-ways are hid in mist,
The past is lost.⁽⁶⁾

(Ernest Francisco Fenollosa’s translation)

I took into the flat of heaven peering; the Cloud-road is all hidden and uncertain; we are lost in the rising mist; I have lost the knowledge of the road. Strange, a Strange sorrow!⁽⁷⁾

(3) Nogami, p.125, translation mine.

(4) Nogami, p. 96, translation mine.

(5) Nogami, p. 111, translation mine.

(6) Nogami, p. 97.

The first translation is by Arthur Waley (1889-1966), the British scholar of Asian literature. The second is by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908), the American historian of Japanese art. Nogami claims that although both translations are successful in transplanting the ideas of the original text, they fail to incorporate the syllable counts and tones of Japanese poetry into their translations.

In spite of his misgivings about translation, Nogami did not give up on translating Japanese classical poetry. Instead, he proposed a highly pedagogical form including a transliteration (or romanized) version of the original Japanese text to be provided on even pages, the translation on odd pages, and commentary in the footnotes. Nogami argued that readers would glean the meaning from the translation, the pronunciation from the transliterated text, and understand further detail concerning meaning and tone from the footnotes.⁽⁸⁾ Nogami never doubted the importance of translating Japanese classical literature into other languages because he believed that “Japanese people hope to make their literature acknowledged internationally and they should introduce their literary productions to the world so that Japanese people will make them understood properly.”⁽⁹⁾ Nogami claimed that Japan had been excluded from international intellectual circles because of the isolationist foreign policy of the Tokugawa shogunate from 1603 to 1868, therefore there was an urge among modern Japanese intellectuals to promote Japanese literature worldwide.⁽¹⁰⁾ Nevertheless, he insisted that classical Japanese poetry was untranslatable into other languages and incomprehensible to those not Japanese. Thus, Nogami regarded providing better translations of classical Japanese poetry as an important effort for Japanese intellectuals in order to establish Japan’s international presence, even though he thought that sentiments inherent in classical Japanese poetry were understandable only by Japanese people.

Such arguments were often adjacent to nationalist discourses of exceptionalism, and while Nogami takes pains to exempt himself from the “current tendency of nationalism,” his claims appear to follow such discourses. It is important to note that the project of establishing a Japanese literary canon was an important cultural adjunct to the establishment of Japan as a nation-state during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Literary classics formed the foundation of ethnic and cultural identities. In order to distinguish Japan from other nations during nation-state construction, intellectuals wrote histories of Japanese literature that emphasized the tradition of *waka* as a specifically Japanese form of poetry with a distinct history. Thus, there was a tendency for modern Japanese intellectuals including Nogami to describe classical Japanese poetry as an ethnic talisman, inherited from the age of Gods and enduring until the present, understandable only to Japanese people. The *Man’yōshū*, which had been appreciated only by professional poets for centuries, was redeployed by intellectuals and government officials in the modern period as an anthology representing the voices of the Japanese people. The *Ōtadokoro* (Imperial Poetry Bureau) was established in 1888 to promote *waka* poetry,⁽¹¹⁾ and soon after, the *Man’yōshū* came to be incorporated into school textbooks as an example of the “Japanese people’s heart and soul.”⁽¹²⁾

One might imagine that the modern reevaluation and promotion of Japanese literary classics would, in the spirit of intellectual honesty, consider any old texts that might appear part of the “tradition.” It turns out, however, that many theorists consistently ignored a history of literary conversations about translation, that date back to the Middle Ages. It is no wonder that they did so; modern Japanese theorists like Nogami, operating within a nationalist ideology, took it for granted that Japanese poetry belonged to Japan now figured as a nation-state with its own peculiar language, culture, and history. Their ideas about the uniqueness and untranslatability of Japanese poetry, as well as the imagined difficulty that any outsider might have when reading these poems, were developed to serve notions of national unity and solidarity.

Medieval conceptions of Japanese poetry had nothing in common with these modern stances, which place a pri-

(7) Nogami, p. 97, translation mine.

(8) Nogami, p. 121, translation mine.

(9) Nogami, p. 124-5, translation mine.

(10) Nogami, p. 1, translation mine.

(11) Shunji Matsuzawa, *Yomukoto no kindai: waka tanka no seijigaku (Modernization of “reading” : politics of Japanese poetry (waka) and Japanese short-poem (tanka))*, Tokyo: Seidosha. 2014.

(12) Yoshikazu Shinada, *Man’yōshū no hakken: kokumin kokka to bunkasōchi toshiteno koten (The invention of Man’yōshū: the nation-state and classics as cultural apparatus)* Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 2019.

macy on “tone,” and which are undergirded by arguments of national exceptionalism. Instead, medieval theorists had a far more cosmopolitan understanding of poetry that aligned it with other great poetic traditions of the times. First, Japanese poetry was seen as universally comprehensible, and thus medieval theorists downplayed the phonic features of poetry such as the tone, opting instead to highlight the similarities of poetics between different languages. They thus sought to establish a logic that made Japanese poetry understandable not only to Japanese people but, in theory, to everyone in China and India as well. To put it another way: how poems are constructed and categorized mattered more than how they sounded. Second, discussions about poetics were not confined to discourses about national or ethnic identities; instead, poetics were seen part of the larger discourse of Buddhism and its sphere of influence, with India at the center and China and Japan on the periphery. Japanese poetry came to be argued not as something *sui generis*, but rather as a realization of the higher language of Buddhist mantras. If all language is seen as partaking in the “true” language of the mantras, translatability between languages can be taken as a given.

My argument will be divided into four sections. In Section One I will argue that medieval poets and intellectuals sought to improve the status of Japanese poetry, and thus developed a translation theory that established Japanese poetry as equal to Chinese poetry. This theory recognizes that both China and Japan have similar and very sophisticated systems of poetics, and then claims that both countries birthed them simultaneously and independently of each other. In this way medieval theorists find way to sidestep the conclusion that Japanese poetry is derived from its Sinitic counterpart.

In Section Two I will illustrate how Fujiwara Shunzei (1114-1204) and other medieval poets emphasized a feature distinctive to Japanese poetry: that it is a *fūzoku*, (“custom”), practiced exclusively in Japan. Medieval poets were sent from the capital to the provinces to work as provincial governors, and were often overwhelmed by local dialects in the countryside, which sometimes sounded incomprehensible in comparison to the language spoken at court. I will argue that those poets developed an understanding of Japanese poetry as a native custom, something practiced by everyone, which could surpass regional and dialectal differences and unify the Japanese people all across the land.

In Section Three I will show how medieval poets and intellectuals promoted Japanese poetry as a “softening” of writings in other languages. They argued that Indian and Sinitic poetics were felicitously translated into Japanese, and thus concluded that Japanese texts were equivalent to Indian and Sinitic ones. I will show how this idea of softening works hand in hand with the effort to overcome the Buddhist center/periphery discourse, which locates India at the center of this faith, with China flanking it, and Japan on the far north-eastern margin. Japan finds a way to inch closer to the Buddhist center on textual (if not geographical) grounds.

Section Four further explores the connections between Japanese poetry and Buddhism. Medieval intellectuals argued that languages (and by extension poetry) existed in a vertical relationship with Buddhism: because all languages participate in that higher truth, no one language has it all or is “untranslatable.” Because all languages are already, in a way, translation of Buddhist essentials, there should be no difficulty in translating between them. Medieval intellectuals claimed that Japanese poetry was a manifestation of Buddha’s mantras, bringing the Japanese language yet closer to the perfect language of Buddha. Contemporary scholars have claimed that these medieval critics promoted a “nationalistic” agenda in asserting the superiority of Japanese poetry over other languages. I will contend instead that they didn’t intend to draw a topography which posited Japan as the center and other kingdoms such as India and China as the peripheries, but rather attempted to establish a worldview centered on Japanese poetry as the manifestation of mantras, which effectively transcends the geographical distances between India and Japan, unifying them as the Buddhist center.

1. Japanese Poetry as the equivalent of Chinese Poetry

The imperial court of ancient Japan was established under the strong influence of the Chinese political and social system. Sinitic was employed in the court as the official written language and Sinitic poetry was originally awarded a higher status than Japanese poetry. While it might be true that some medieval poets initially failed to find the distinctiveness of Japanese poetry by accepting the influence and superiority of Sinitic poetry and poetics,⁽¹³⁾ this subordination of Japanese to Sinitic poetry was not a permanent condition. Certain medieval poets and intellectuals

sought to establish an equivalence between Japanese and Sinitic poetics and poetry, by overlapping ranges of reference. This does not necessarily mean that medieval poets gave up developing their own Japanese poetics and poetry. Rather, they valued the idea that Japanese poetry had equivalents with other languages in order to maintain distinctive features of Japanese poetry.

Fujiwara Kiyosuke (1104-1177) was a (late Heian period) distinguished medieval poet and courtier. As the third family head and the successor of the Rokujō Fujiwara House⁽¹⁴⁾ – a family with poetry in its blood – he wrote numerous poetic treatises such as *Ōgishō*, *Poetic Profundities* (1124?), and *Fukurozōshi*, *The Bag of Poetic Knowledge* (date unknown). As a conservative critic Kiyosuke maintained that poets should compose poems after the ancients, and he admired the ancient anthology *Man'yōshū*. He is known to have clashed with his contemporary, Fujiwara Shunzei from the Mikohidari House (another family of influential poets), who proposed radical ideas on understanding and writing Japanese poetry.

Kiyosuke's poetic treatise, *Ōgishō*, claims that Japanese poetics shared the same generic categories as Sinitic poetics.

While Sinitic poetry [*shī*] is a tradition handed down in China, Japanese poetry [*uta*] is words of our land. Although they do not sound the same, they must share the same categories of genre. Short poems [*tanka*] correspond to prose-poems [*fu*] in Sinitic poetry; long poems to eight-line regulated verses with five or seven characters [*lǚshī*]; head-repeated poems [*sedōka*] to He'nan Songs; *Konpon-ka*⁽¹⁵⁾ to *Yuediao*-mode poems; linked poems [*renga*] to linked verses [*renku*]. The correspondence to Japanese palindrome poetry [*kaibun*] is also found in China. These Sinitic counterparts are in no way different from the Japanese ones.⁽¹⁶⁾

It is worth noting that, although Kiyosuke admitted that both Sinitic poetics and Japanese poetics had developed independently, he emphasized that they coincidentally built the same classification system with the same categories of poetic genres. By contending that Japanese poetics had developed a sophisticated poetic system which had an identical counterpart in the much admired poetics of China, Kiyosuke intended to confirm that Japanese poetry had its own value on a par with Sinitic poetry.

The same logic appears in poetry treatises written by his contemporaries. The monk Kenshō (ca. 1128-ca. 1210) was a medieval (late Heian and early Kamakura period) poet, courtier, and monk, and the adopted son of Fujiwara Akisuke (1055-1123), who founded the Rokujō Fujiwara House. In his treatise, *Kokinshūchū*, or the *Commentary on the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* (date unknown), Kenshō asserted that, even though Japanese poetry (*uta* 歌) and Sinitic poetry (*shi* 詩) used to be named differently, contemporary people mixed these names together and referred to the Sinitic poetry as *kara-uta*⁽¹⁷⁾ and Japanese poetry as *yamato-uta*.⁽¹⁸⁾

The important thing to be noted here is that it was a common practice among ancient and medieval poets to use *uta* to indicate Japanese poetry or poetry in general, and “*shi*” to specify Sinitic poetry. They also held the assumption that Sinitic poetry was based on sophisticated and systematized principles of poetics while Japanese poetry developed spontaneously and had much fewer organized principles regarding poetics. Thus, by pointing out that the Japanese word *uta* could be used to indicate both Japanese poetry and Sinitic poetry, Kenshō, claimed that Sinitic poetry was based on the same poetic principles as those of Japanese, even if the languages were different.

(13) Masayuki Maeda, “Chūsei chūko ni okeru nihon ishiki no hyōshō: waka, nihon, kigen” (Representations of awareness of Japan in late ancient and medieval times: Japanese poetry, Japan and its origin), *Jōdai Bungaku (Ancient Literature)* vol.94, 2014, p.13-26; Toyoo Ogawa, *Chūsei nihon no shinwa mojishintai (Myths, Letters, Bodies in Medieval Japan)*, Tokyo:Shinwa-sha, 2014.

(14) After the middle 11th century aristocrat families such as Rokujō Fujiwara House and Mikohidari House, who specialized in *waka* poetry, established the master and pupil system based on their views on composition of poetry.

(15) *Konpon-ka* is the name of a poetic form referred to in the Sinitic Preface of *Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, but the meaning of the form has never been agreed upon.

(16) Nobutsuna Sasaki ed., *Ōgishō (Poetic Profundities)* Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1958, p.222, translation mine.

(17) “*Kara*” means ancient China; “*uta*” means poetry.

(18) Hitaku Kyūsojin ed., *Kokinshū-chū (Commentary on the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times)*, Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1958.

Another example can be seen in *Kokinjoshō, the Commentary on the Preface of Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* (1263) by Fujiwara no Tameie (1198-1275), the successor to the Mikohidari family and grandson of Fujiwara Shunzei. Tameie claimed that, even though Japanese poetry and Sinitic poetry were composed in different languages, they shared the same virtues. He quoted from the *Great Preface*, written by Wei Hung (1st century), the most authoritative statement on *Shijing*, or *the Book of Songs* (BC 11th-BC 6th), “the affections are stirred within and take on form in words” and “the poem is that to which what is intently in the heart goes. In the heart it is “being intent”; coming out in language, it is a poem,”⁽¹⁹⁾ and he argued, Japanese poetry did these things as well.⁽²⁰⁾

We can observe that poets from the Rokujō Fujiwara House such as Kiyosuke and Kenshō as well as those from the Mikohidari House such as Tameie argued that even though Japanese poetry developed on its own, it shared the same poetic systems, principles, and values with Sinitic poetry. They contended that Japanese poetry could be regarded as equal to Sinitic poetry, and, in consequence, readers of both Japanese poetry and Sinitic poetry could appreciate in theory the meaning of both bodies of poetry even though they were written in different languages.

2. Japanese Poetry as Natural Utterance and Custom (*fūzoku*) of Japan

The same scholars of the late Heian period who discussed the poetic systems shared by Sinitic and Japanese poetry went one step further in privileging poetry of their own country by conceptualizing it as natural utterance. Japanese poetry, they claimed, was the ideal way of describing and appreciating the world because it emerged spontaneously. This act of poetic creation, they said, was a *fūzoku* (風俗 custom), which had been practiced all through the ages in Japan.

Fujiwara Shunzei, a prominent medieval poet and courtier, was admired by his contemporaries in the literary world of the imperial court despite his low rank. He was the fifth family head of the Mikohidari House, which, as mentioned above, rivaled the Rokujō Fujiwara House, specifically Fujiwara Kiyosuke. In addition to writing poetry, Shunzei was an active judge of poetic competitions, worked as an editor and critic, and in 1183 was commissioned by the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192) to compile the seventh imperial anthology of *waka* poetry, *the Senzaiwakashū*, (*Collection of a Thousand Years*).

Among Shunzei's poetry treatises is the *Korai fūteishō* (*Notes on Poetic Styles through the Ages*, 1197, revised 1201), composed upon request of Princess Shokushi (1149-1201), the daughter of the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa. Here, Shunzei introduces 191 poems from *Man'yōshū* and 395-398 poems from seven imperial anthologies, and also includes essays delineating the history of Japanese poetry and discussing the nature of Japanese poetry and the purposes for composing *waka* poems.

Shunzei introduces his definition of Japanese poetry as natural utterance in response to Ki no Tsurayuki's (868-945?) *kana* preface⁽²¹⁾ to the *Kokinwakashū*, or *the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, one of the most influential statements on ancient poetics. In this volume, Ki no Tsurayuki wrote:

The songs of Yamato take the human mind as their seed and grow into myriad leaves of words. The people who live in the world, in their abundant concerns and affairs, relate the thoughts in their minds to the things they see and hear, and so express them. Hearing the voices of the bush-warblers that sing among the flowers, of the frog that live in the water, among all living creatures, what could there be that does compose songs? It is songs that without using force move heaven and earth, brings compassion to invisible spirits and gods, soften the relations between man and woman, and consoles the hearts of brave warriors.⁽²²⁾

(19) Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, p.40-1.

(20) Yōichi Katagiri ed., *Kokinjoshō (Commentary on the Preface of Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times)*, Kyoto: Asao Shōbundō, 1971, p.168.

(21) The *kana* preface literally means preface written in Japanese distinguishing it from *Sinitic* (mana) *Preface* written by Ki no Yoshimochi (?-919).

(22) Translation from Torquil Duthie, *The Kokinshū: selected poems*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2023, pp-225-6.

It is worth noting that Tsurayuki did not necessarily distinguish poetic language from ordinary language. Instead, poetry is for him something naturally and spontaneously uttered by every living creature, and thus he establishes an inclusive poetics in which “every living creature sings its song.” This claim is precisely what Shunzei challenges:

As stated in the preface to *Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, songs of Japan “take the human heart as their seed and flourish as myriad leaves of words.” Thus, without Japanese poetry, no one would know the fragrance of the cherry blossoms in spring, nor would they know the color of the bright leaves in autumn. Without Japanese poetry, what would we do for an original heart (*moto no kokoro*)? That is why previous emperors have never downgraded Japanese poetry and all people from established clans have appreciated Japanese poetry in competition with others.⁽²³⁾

Undermining Ki no Tsurayuki’s statement that poets express their heart by describing nature in Japanese poetry, Shunzei established a counter-theory solidly grounded in the textuality of the poetic tradition, in which he argued that it is precisely Japanese poetry that links the human heart with nature. Poets must not take for granted that their spontaneous feelings come from their heart, because poets could not have appreciated the beauty of nature if thousands of Japanese poems hadn’t already described such instances of beauty.⁽²⁴⁾ Therefore, he suggests that poets should learn the long history of Japanese poetry.

In 1183 Shunzei was commissioned by the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa to compile the seventh imperial anthology of *waka* poetry, the *Senzaiwakashū*. In his preface to this collection, Shunzei defines Japanese poetry as a custom (*fūzoku*) of Japan.

Since people have cherished and practiced Japanese poetry as our custom (*fūzoku*), a number of poets have earned their names in history. Thus, those who do not learn or engage in the composition of Japanese poems must have a narrow view on things as if they were standing in front of a fence, which hinders their vision.⁽²⁵⁾

Shunzei claims that people have practiced composition and appreciation of Japanese poems as their custom for centuries. This emphasis on engagement with poetic texts again contradicts Tsurayuki’s claim that any living creature could make poetry. In contrast, Shunzei embeds his argument in the cultural, stressing that the custom of composing and appreciating Japanese poems had enabled people in Japan to perceive the world precisely.⁽²⁶⁾

Other medieval poetic treatises frequently referred to the term *fūzoku* when describing their composition and appreciation of Japanese poems. The twelfth century *Waka mutei shō*, (*Notes on the Infinite Profundity of Japanese Poetry*), possibly written by the poet Fujiwara no Mototoshi (1056-1142), states: “Japanese poetry is the custom (*fūzoku*), of our dynasty. It emerged in the Age of the Gods and has been popular through the age of man.”⁽²⁷⁾ The same phrase is found in a medieval monk Jōkaku’s (1147-1226) poetry treatise, *Waka iroha*, or the *Colored Leaves of Poetry* (1198)⁽²⁸⁾ as well as the personal anthology of the prominent medieval poet Jien (1155-1224), *Shūgyokushū*, or the *Collection of Gathered Jewels* (1346).⁽²⁹⁾

⁽²³⁾ Fumio Hashimoto; Tamotsu Ariyoshi; Haruo Fujihira ed., *Korai fūteishō (Notes on Poetic Styles through the Ages)*, Karon-shū, Shinpen Koten Bungaku Zenshū vol.87, Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1997, p.249, translation mine.

⁽²⁴⁾ Haruo Shirane, “Lyricism and Intertextuality: An Approach to Shunzei’s Poetics”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.50, no.1, June, 1990.

⁽²⁵⁾ Tatsuro Katano; Yoichi Matsuno ed., *Senzaiwakashū (Collection of a thousand leaves)*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei vol.10, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993, translation mine.

⁽²⁶⁾ In the preface to *Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* Tsurayuki stressed the fact that there were six kinds of poems in Japanese poetry and the same kinds of poems existed in Sinitic poetry simultaneously. Shunzei did not express explicitly his views on Sinitic poetry in his treatises.

⁽²⁷⁾ Nobutsuna Sasaki ed., *Waka-mutei-shō (Notes on Infinite Profundity of Japanese Poetry)*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei vol.4, Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1956, p.250, translation mine.

⁽²⁸⁾ Nobutsuna Sasaki ed., *Waka-iroha (The Colored Leaves of Poetry)*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei vol.3, Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1956, p. 96.

The word *shūzoku* (習俗), the meaning of which is similar to *fūzoku*, was also frequently used to describe the characteristics of Japanese poetry. The poet Fujiwara Michitoshi (1047-1099) writes in the preface of *Goshūi-wakashū-mokuroku-jo*, or *Catalog of Later Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry* (date unknown), that Japanese poetry is the custom [*“shūzoku”*] of our kingdom.⁽²⁹⁾

This idea of *fūzoku* appears to stem in part from social necessity. A Japanese literary scholar, Ogawa Toyoo, pointed out that in late 10th century and 11th century poets frequently referred to the word “*fūzoku*, which had been used to call local customs in Japan, to describe Japanese poetry as a custom (*fūzoku*) of Japan in their treatises.⁽³¹⁾ Many poets also served as provincial governors, or *zuryō*, who experienced first-hand the many dialects and local customs of their appointed provinces, and were sometimes overwhelmed by them. This experience might have compelled these poets to conceptualize Japanese poetry as a custom of Japan at large and to establish it as the umbrella concept that could encompass all of Japan’s different local customs in their diversity. In this way, Japanese poetry is seen as transcending local dialects, and unifying all people living in Japan.

Interestingly, Shunzei and other medieval poets borrowed the term *fūzoku* from Buddhist texts. The term appears in an ancient Buddhist text, *Tōdai Temple Buddhist Prayers Manuscript*, or *Tōdaiji fujumon kō* (early 10th century):

The one, who would preach the Holy Dharma to each of the world, has no difficulties in translating languages. When people from the Great Tang, Silla, Japan, Persia, Kunlun, and India gather, Buddha could make one sound understood by them in each customary (*fūzoku*) language.⁽³²⁾

This passage describes how Buddha preached the Dharma by uttering single sounds that could be understood by anyone speaking any dialect.⁽³³⁾ Medieval poets borrowed from this precedent to emphasize that Japanese poetry was more than just a custom in Japan; it was linked to the universal truth of the Dharma. This enabled them to later establish a logical basis for claiming that Japanese poetry was translation of the Dharma (which I will discuss in a later section).

3. Japanese Poetry as “softening” of writings in other languages

There was a prevailing idea in medieval Japan that the world was composed of three kingdoms: India (*Tenjiku*), China (*Shintan*) and Japan (*Honchō*), three regions reflecting the spread of Buddhism.⁽³⁴⁾ Challenging the assumption that Japan was located on the periphery of Buddhist cosmology medieval poets developed theories that would overturn that relationship, by arguing that Japanese poetry was a refinement of Sinitic poetry.

One of the most influential medieval poetic treatises, the *Sanryūshō*, or *Oral Records on the Preface of the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* (ca.1286), attributed to Fujiwara Yoshimoto (?-?), discussed Japanese poetry as “harmonizing” poetic traditions from other languages. He grounded his argument in the word “Yamato” (大和), the word for Japan at the time, whose individual characters mean “great” and “harmony,” respectively.⁽³⁵⁾

The name “Japanese poetry” [*yamato-uta*] has two meanings. One derives from the fact that the monk Rajū

(29) Hajime Ishikawa; Yamamoto, Hajime ed., *Shūgyoku-shū* (*Collection of Gathered Jewels*), Nihon Waka Bungaku Taikei vol. 59, Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 2011, p.253.

(30) Jun Kubota; Yoshinobu Hirata ed., *Goshūi-waka-shū* (*Later Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry*), Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei vol.8, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, p. 404.

(31) Toyoo Ogawa, “Waka wa wagakuni no fūzoku nari saikō (Reconsidering the Phrase “Japanese Poetry Is the Custom of Our Land”),” *Nihon Bungaku* (*Japanese Literature*) vol.63 no.5, 2014, p.51.

(32) Norio Nakata ed., *Tōdaiji-fujumon-kō no kokugogakuteki kenkyū* (*Linguistic Study on Tōdaiji Temple Buddhist Prays Manuscript*), Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1969, p. 128-9, translation mine.

(33) Ogawa, p.49.

(34) Makiko Okazaki, “Wa to iu shisō” (On the Concept of “Wa”), *Waka no chikara* (*The Power of Japanese Poetry*), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005.

Sanzō, who introduced six genres of poetry from India to China, established the six genres of Sinitic poetics, and the monk Dōji, who brought the concept to Japan, provided the six genres to define Japanese poetry. In summary the name “Japanese poetry” means “greatly harmonized poetry” because Japanese poetry is a result of harmonization of poetic concepts over three kingdoms.⁽³⁶⁾

Unlike Fujiwara Kiyosuke, who argued that Sinitic and Japanese poetics developed spontaneously and independently, the author of this text, a Buddhist monk, knew that Buddhism was transferred from India to Japan, and that Sinitic poetics were introduced to Japan in company with Buddhism. He also gathered that some important Sinitic concepts about poetry originated in India. This admission necessitates a different argument to establish Japanese poetry as equivalent to its Sinitic counterpart. By breaking down the Sinitic characters used for *yamato* (大和) into its separate meanings of “great” and “harmony”, the *Sanryūshō* author proclaims that the word *yamato-uta* signifies “greatly harmonized poetry.” This harmonization, he argues, is the end result of the transfer of poetic concepts across two central regions in the Buddhist cosmology, first by Rajū Sanzō, who brought them from India to China, and then by Dōji, who carried them from China to Japan. In this conception, there is no “original”; to the contrary, by being passed from hand to hand, by traversing region to region, these poetic concepts become harmonized at their final destination, Yamato.

A similar logic is found in another treatise, *Kokin-jo-chū*, or *Annotations of the Preface of the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* (date unknown). The supposed author, Cloistered Prince Son'en (1298-1356), was the sixth son of Emperor Fushimi (1265-13-17), and a poet and an abbot of Shōrei-in Temple, where he established the school of Shōrei-in calligraphy.

The name of the kingdom Yamato means that the [languages of the] three kingdoms are in harmony with each other. People say that when they translate Sanskrit texts from India into Sinitic, they soften the Sanskrit, harmonizing it with Sinitic. And when Sinitic texts are translated into Japanese, they are also softened and come to correspond to Japanese texts. Thus, Japanese poetry, which became the great achievement of harmonized languages of three kingdoms, is called *yamato-uta*.⁽³⁷⁾

Son'en argues here that, when Buddhist texts written in Sanskrit were translated to Sinitic as well as when Sinitic texts were translated to Japanese, translators made a great effort to make the texts approachable and familiar to readers. For Son'en translation is not a way to convert the meaning of the original text from one language to another, nor is it to render the translated text understandable to readers in a literal manner; instead, translation is a way to make readers feel close to the original text and appreciate the meaning of the text on a more everyday level.

Son'en used the word *yawaragu* (和ぐ), which literally means softening and was interpreted as harmonizing one with others, to describe the process of translating Sanskrit texts to Sinitic and Sinitic texts to Japanese. Although the pronunciations are different, the Sinitic character is the same as that used in the name of Japan, Yamato. Son'en leveraged this similarity to argue that Japan had the native skill and sophistication to render texts written in foreign languages approachable to readers.

As we have seen from Son'en's discussion, in the medieval period, poets and intellectuals began to argue that they could trace the history of Japanese poetry back to ancient India, where the Dharma was written in Sanskrit, and

(35) “Yamato” was likely the name of Nara province in western Japan, where the capital was located until 794, and later the name was used to call the whole country, while “Hinomoto” (日本), which literally means “the land of rising sun”, was also used in diplomatic and administrative documents as the name of the country. Although “Nihon” and “Nippon”, alternative Japanese readings of the Chinese characters of “Hinomoto”, became acknowledged as names for the country names from the late Heian period onward, the term “Yamato” was still in common use among poets and intellectuals throughout the pre-modern period.

(36) Yoichi Katagiri ed., *Sanryū-shō* (*Oral Records on the Preface of the Preface of the Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*), Chūsei-kinshū-chūshakusho-kaidai (Collection of Medieval Commentaries of Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times) vol. 2, Kyoto: Akao-shōbun-dō, 1973, p.224, translation mine.

(37) Akihiro Satake ed., *Kokin jo chū: Manjuin zō*. Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, 1977, p.72, translation mine.

they could track how the Sanskrit text was translated into the softened form of Sinitic, which was again softened as it was rendered into Japanese poetry.^(38/39)

We can now understand that medieval poets developed another theory of translation, in which Japanese poetry was regarded as softening of writings in other languages. They even claimed that, although both Japanese poetry and Sinitic poetry were translations of the Buddhist mantras, Japanese poetry was ideal because it rendered the profound meaning of the Dharma more accessible to readers using vocabulary and expressions describing people's daily life. This translation theory reveals a sense of belonging to both Japan and the larger Buddhist community. In the next section, I will show another attempt by medieval theorists to establish the sense of belonging to both Japan and the Buddhist community by proposing that Japanese poetry was identical to Sanskrit.

4. Japanese Poetry as Manifestation of the Dharma

Medieval Japanese translation theory was not limited to the translation itself – that is to say the mere textual artifact; in time, theorists began to apply translation theories not only to the written texts of Japanese poetry but to the entire process of composition, reading, and appreciation of Japanese poetic texts. Medieval poets such as Shunzei and his contemporary, the monk Jien developed radical theories on translation, in which all poetic activities were figured as a process towards reaching the Dharma.

In *Korai fūteishō* Shunzei emphasizes that there are crucial similarities between Buddhism and Japanese poetry, which both hinge on the dynamics of transmission:

The book *Tendai Mohe Zhiguan* written by Huan-ting opens with his explanation of the process of transmission of the Dharma by introducing how Buddha handed down the Dharma to his disciples: Śākyamuni, transmitted it to Kāśyapa who, in turn, passed it on to Ānanda, and it went down through twenty-three disciples to reach Zhiyi. When I hear about the process of the transmission of the Dharma, I cannot help having great reverence for it. And it reminds me of the history of Japanese poetry from antiquity, which has been handed down in the same fashion [of the transmission of Dharma]. The process of the transmission of Japanese poetry took the shape of a series of anthologies, which began with the *Man'yō-shū*, and passed to the *Kokin-shū*, the *Gosen-shū*, and the *Shūi-shū*, thus we should learn from these anthologies the deep meaning of Japanese poetry.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Here, Shunzei points out that both Buddhism and Japanese poetry shared the lineage of transmission of meanings. The Dharma was transmitted from one disciple to another. Similarly, the principles of Japanese poetry were handed down from one anthology to another. It is important to note that Shunzei delineated the transmission of Japanese poetry through four anthologies, echoing the four disciples of Buddha. This tells us how Shunzei paid careful attention to establish the relationship between Buddhism and Japanese poetry. Shunzei anticipates that his readers might find it odd, perhaps even sacrilegious, to equate poetry collections with sacred teachings, and articulated an ingenious defense:

But one might think that *Mohe Zhiguan* has the deep truth, which was preached by the “golden-mouthed one.” On the other hand, Japanese poetry looks like verbal games known as “floating phrases and fictive utterances.” However, on the contrary, [Japanese poetry] reveals the profundity of things. This is what Japanese poetry shares with Buddhism. Because worldly desires are regarded to turn into enlightenment in Buddhist teachings. [...] There is a reciprocal flow of meaning between such things [as poetry] and Buddhism, which maintains the

⁽³⁸⁾ Another example can be found in a medieval poetry treatise, *Notes on Infinite Profundity of Japanese Poetry*, or *Waka muteishō* (12th century), attributed to the poet Fujiwara no Mototoshi (1056-1142), states that the name of *waka*, Japanese poetry, means that the languages of the three kingdoms are in harmony with each other. (Nobutsuna Sasaki ed., *Waka-mutei-shō* (*Notes on Infinite Profundity of Japanese Poetry*), Nihon Kagaku Taikēi (Anthology of Japanese Poetics) vol. 4, Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1956), p.226.

⁽³⁹⁾ Satoshi Itō, “Bon, kan, wago dōjitsu-shi-kan no seiritsu kiban” (The formation of the notion that identifies Sanskrit with Chinese and Japanese languages), *Inseiki bunka ronshū* (*Collection of essays on cultures in Insei-period*) vol.1, Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2001.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Korai fūteishō*, p.250-1, translation mine.

interdependence of all things.⁽⁴¹⁾

In “floating phrases and fictive utterances” (*fugen-kigo*), Shunzei obliquely quotes the prominent Tang Dynasty Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846), who described his own poetry as “wild words and decadent diction.”⁽⁴²⁾ These terms had been imported into Japan some time around the turn of the ninth century, and were commonly used in the case against the importance of poetry. Shunzei, however, cleverly reorients the focus around the word “floating,” arguing that in the “reciprocal flow of meaning,” one can discover “the profundity of things.”

Some scholarship claims that Shunzei associated Japanese poetry with Buddhism in an effort to overcome the prevailing idea that Japanese poetry was groundless false talk with decorative rhetoric;⁽⁴³⁾ however, I would argue that Shunzei’s interest extends beyond the mere defense of poetry to its potential detractors, and takes at face value the philosophical consequences of equating poetry with Buddhism. I would like to direct our attention away from the simple equation of two objects, poetry and the Dharma, and towards Shunzei’s emphasis on the state of “flow,” which does more than simply translate from one static form to another. Instead “flow” is the centerpiece, the heretofore underappreciated ligature necessary for confirming that things are indeed “profound” and “interdependent.” We can learn this from the next passage in which he contends that not only composing Japanese poetry but all poetic practices – including reading and appreciation – are important inasmuch as they exemplify Buddhist practices of nonduality: “Japanese poetry achieved a deep way, which resembles the three stages of truth in Tendai, namely, *ku*, *ke*, and *chū*.⁽⁴⁴⁾” In Tendai Buddhism *ku* (the void), *ke* (the provisional), and *chū*, (the middle) are seen to unify three truths of the world, which are not distinct one another, but rather share the same essence. It is precisely this sharing that necessitates a flow between the three “stages of truth.”

Scholars have argued that Shunzei was successful in pioneering a new way of reading Japanese poetry as something with no single fixed reading, but rather as something that could be interpreted endlessly: “by linking the *uta* with the three stages of Tendai, he places the composition, reading, and appreciation of poetry in a context of complete open-endedness.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ While this may be true, it does limited service to Shunzei’s aims, which mean to value all poetic activities, not just the meaning of the poem itself. If we take a look at the following statement by Shunzei, we can learn that he emphasized all aspects of poetry, including the process of composing, reading, and appreciating.

In general, a poem does not necessarily include intriguing phrases nor claim the order of things. Yet, when a poet recites his poem, the act of which is called “*jiei-ka*,” whether he performs it aloud or recites it through vocal intonation, he must sense it with allure and with profundity. A fine poem is accompanied by an aura of its own, above and beyond its wording and its style. [Readers] sense this aura about the poem just as [they view] spring cherry blossoms veiled by haze, as [they hear] the calling of deer in the autumn moonlight, as [they smell] the scent of the spring breeze blended with a hedge of plum blossoms, or as [they observe] the autumn rains shower down on the crimson leaves upon the peak.⁽⁴⁶⁾

(41) *Korai fūteishō*, p.251.

(42) The phrase is from the poem that reads “I vow to take the error of the wild words and decadent diction of my worldly literary enterprise in this life and transform it into the karma of praising the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma of Buddha’s Vehicle for ages and ages to come.” (Rimer, Thomas J.; Chaves, Jonathan, *Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing: The Wakan Rōei Shū*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p.176.)

(43) Watanabe, Yasuaki, *Chūsei waka no seisei (Formation of Medieval Japanese Poetry)*, Tokyo: Wakakusa Shobō, 1999; Muramatsu, Yūji. “Fujiwara Shunzei no karon to Tendai shikan (Fujiwara Shunzei and Tendai Mohe Zhiguan)”, *Kyōritsu joshi tanki daigaku bunka kiyō (Bulletin for Department for Language and Culture, Kyōritsu Women’s University)* vol.27, 1984.

(44) *Korai fūteishō*, p.251, translation mine.

(45) William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, p.39.

(46) Hajime Ishikawa, “Kohon Jichin Kashō jikaawase” (Transcription of Priest Jichin’s Solo Poetry Contest), *Hiroshima Joshi Daigaku Bungakubu Kiyō (Bulletin of Department of Literature, Hiroshima Women’s University)*, vo.23, 1980, p.162, translation mine.

In this passage from Shunzei's postscript to *Jichin Kashō jikaawase*, or *Priest Jichin's Solo Poetry Contest* (1198), Shunzei stresses that an ideal poem contains evocative qualities coming from beyond its wording and style. He tries to define this "aura" more precisely by explaining that readers can perceive it when they experience the events described in the poem as real. He shows some examples of readers' experiences viewing spring cherry blossoms veiled in a haze, hearing the call of deer in the autumn moonlight, sensing the scent of spring breeze blended with plum blossoms, and observing the autumn rains shower down on the crimson leaves upon a peak. This statement, considered alongside the above passage from *Korai fūteishō*, in which Shunzei equated Japanese poetry to Buddhist practices, clarifies how Shunzei conceptualized the activities of composition, reading, and appreciation of poetry: a poet would learn that the truth of non-substantiality of things (*ku*) in the midst of composing a poem because it doesn't exist yet. The poet then would grasp the truth of temporary existence (*ke*) when reading the written text of the poem just composed, and recognize what was originally conceived. The poet would finally reach the truth of the middle way (*chū*) when the poem is appreciated by others, who would propose various interpretations and evaluations of the poem. In this way Shunzei considers the whole process of composing, reading, and appreciating Japanese poetry as a translation of the three truths, or the Dharma, of Buddhism.

A contemporary of Fujiwara no Shunzei, Jien, proposed his own radical translation theory. Originally from a noble family of very high rank, Jien eventually became head of the Tendai school of Mahayana Buddhism. As an active poet, Jien participated in numerous poetry gatherings, particularly those around Shunzei. Jien's many surviving works include a private collection of poetry and other writings, known as *Shūgyokushū*, or the *Collection of Gathered Jewels*, which was compiled posthumously in 1346 and includes nearly six thousand poems. This collection contains the following passage in which Jien explains the close relationship between Japanese poetry and Buddhism.

Japanese poetry has been actively composed as a custom (*fūzoku*), of our kingdom until now. Comprising five-seven-five-seven-seven syllables, Japanese poetry contains five phrases. [These] represents the Five Elements [in Tantric Buddhism] and the Five Phases, or Wu Xing, [of ancient Sinitic philosophy]. The sutra's worldview is thus by no means different from Japanese poetry's profane view of the world. The two truths of "conventional truth" and "ultimate truth" [in Buddhist doctrine] have never been separated from each other. "Conventional truth" can never be separated from the Five Elements. ["Truth"] ranges from Buddha's body to plants and trees, which don't have souls. "Reality" also never be apart from the Five Phases. ["Ultimate truth"] covers from heaven and earth to sea and mountain. [...] If we consider the nature of Japanese poetry, people in this kingdom should never regard it as inferior to [poetry in the] Sinitic language, let alone think composition of poetry as less important. Each kingdom has its customs. There are no good or bad ones.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In this passage, we can confirm that Jien attempts to establish the connection between Japanese poetry and the Buddhist doctrine of "conventional truth" and "ultimate truth" through intermediaries of Tantric Buddhism and Sinitic philosophy, Wu Xing. Jien argues that the five-phrase constitution of Japanese poetry represents "the five elements" (earth, water, fire, air, and space) in Tantric Buddhism, which are considered the constituent elements of the universe. He also associates Japanese poetry's five phrases with "the Five Phases" of Wu Xing (which described the relations and interactions between things). Jien also points out that "the five elements" in Tantric Buddhism referred to the "conventional truth" of Buddhism, which described people's daily life and concrete world (the surface level of reality), while "The Five Phases" of Wu Xing captured "ultimate truth" of Buddhism, in other words, ultimate reality and its inherent characteristics. In this way, Jien associates Japanese poetry with both the surface and the deeper levels of reality of Buddhism, in other words, the universal truth of the Dharma. Here, Jien also redeploys and expands on the prevailing notion of Japanese poetry as a custom (*fūzoku*) to show that this local custom in Japan could also reveal universal truth, just as the Dharma can appear in different local languages. This constitutes Jien's

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Hajime Ishikawa; Hajime Yamamoto ed., *Shūgyokushū (Collection of Gathered Jewels)*, Waka Bungaku Taikei vol.59, Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 2011, p.253-4, translation mine.

attempt to overturn the center/periphery relationship by asserting that “the sutra’s worldview is the same as Japanese poetry’s profane view of the world”.

Jien’s claim that Japanese poetry partakes in the Dharma is not self-evident, so he then articulates an etymological defense, explaining how the Japanese and Sanskrit languages are actually quite close:

As Sanskrit written in the sutra is the very language that passed from Buddha’s venerable lips, those who enter Buddhism must know that [it] reveals the true meaning of Buddha’s teachings. The number of Sinitic syllables doesn’t match Japanese, which has 47 syllables, [Sinitic language is not as close to Japanese], but Sanskrit is closer to, or even the same as Japanese. A clay vessel is called a *kawarake*; a bow is pronounced as a *tarashi* in Japanese. We can find many examples like these, and it is said that such words are pronounced the same as in Sanskrit.

As it is the custom of this kingdom, devoting oneself to Japanese poetry leads one to pursue Buddhist practice.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In this passage Jien claims that the composition of Japanese poems is essentially the same practice as pursuing Buddhist training. This parallels the idea that Shunzei promoted in his treatise, *Korai fūteishō*, outlined earlier in this section. However, Jien takes the argument a few steps further in his argument of the links between Sanskrit and Japanese languages and his examples of words such as “clay vessel” and “bow,” which he contends are pronounced the same in Japanese and in Sanskrit.

From our modern perspective, Jien’s poetics may seem far-fetched, especially since his etymological arguments cannot be supported by modern linguistic analysis. However, his ideas found traction among later poets and intellectuals, who enthusiastically endorsed them. An example of this is an influential work by the monk Mujū (1226-1312), *Shasekishū*, or *the Collection of Sand and Pebbles* (ca.1279-1283), which includes a five-volume anthology of Buddhist parables. With his rich knowledge of Buddhism, Mujū intends to divulgate Buddhist doctrines by collecting stories not only from Japan but also from China and India and introducing various episodes about the miraculous experiences of Buddhist saints and common people. In the following passage Mujū demonstrates that Japanese poetry is a manifestation of *Dhāraṇī* (Buddhist chants containing Sanskrit phrases):

Although *Dhāraṇī* employ the ordinary language of India, when the words are maintained as *Dhāraṇī*, they have the capacity to destroy wickedness and remove suffering. Japanese poetry also uses the ordinary language of the world; when we use *waka* to convey religious intent, there will necessarily be a favorable response. When they embody the spirit of Buddha’s Law, there can be no doubt that they are *Dhāraṇī*.

The words of India, China, and Japan differ, but their meanings are mutual and their results the same. Through them Buddhism spread, its doctrines were accepted, and the benefits have not been without avail. Among words there are no fixed standards, if only the meaning is grasped and the thought conveyed, there will necessarily be a favorable response (*kannō*).⁽⁴⁹⁾

Dhāraṇī is thought to be a medium to convey the Dharma written in sutras. Mujū argues here that Buddha uses languages of every region when he conveys *Dhāraṇī*, or the spirit of his law, therefore Japanese poetry, which also used ordinary language, is identical to *Dhāraṇī*. If *Dhāraṇī* can transcend any particular language, it is easy to see that whatever language used to express *Dhāraṇī* is no more than a vessel for communicating it.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Mujū then introduces a Japanese poem, believed to have been composed by the Kiyomizu Kannon, or Bod-

(48) *Shūgyōkushū*, p. 253-4, translation mine.

(49) Robert E. Morrell, “*Sand and Pebbles (Shasekishū): The Tales of Muju Ichien*”, *A Voice for Pluralism in Kamakura Buddhism* (SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies), New York: State University of New York Press. 1985, pp.163-4.

(50) Keller R. Kimbrough, “Reading the Miraculous Powers of Japanese Poetry: Spells, Truth Acts, and a Medieval Buddhist Poetics of the Supernatural”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* vol.32 no.1, 2005, p.7.

hisattva in Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto, and argues that the poem is a manifestation of *Dhāraṇī*.

Great sages have appeared in our kingdom and composed *waka*. There is even the poem of the Kiyomizu Kannon:

Nao tanome	Although your pain
Shimeji ga hara no	Be as the burning moxa grass
Sasemogusa	On Shimeji's fields,
Waga yo no naka ni	Still trust in me while yet
Aran kagiri wa	I remain in this world.

This is certainly a *Dhāraṇī*; there can be no doubt about it.

Likewise the gods, greatly admiring a man's poetry, will grant him his wish. The efficacy of Japanese poetry and the nature of mystic verses are in every respect to be understood as identical with *Dhāraṇī*.⁽⁵¹⁾

The poem, which was originally collected in the *Shinkokinwakashū*, or *the New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (1210), the eighth imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, describes Kannon's wish to save people, who suffer from their lives and burn with pain just like burning moxa grass on fields in the Shimeji area. This poem was popular among ancient and medieval poets, who discussed how the poem came to be attributed to Kannon. Fujiwara Kiyosuke argued in his poetry treatise, *Fukuro Zōshi*, that Kannon composed this poem by responding to a woman who had visited Kiyomizu Temple to pray to the Kannon for help.⁽⁵²⁾ Mujū here argues that Buddha appears as the Kannon in Japan and conveys *Dhāraṇī* as a form of Japanese poetry, a natural way to guide people in need in this country.

The idea that Japanese poetry is a direct expression of Buddha's ideas appears in the poetry treatise *Kokin Jochū*, or *Annotation of the Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (date unknown) by the monk Ryōyo Shōgei (1341-1420). Ryōyo Shōgei was a monk of the Pure Land sect and an expert on Japanese poetry. In his treatise he criticizes the prevailing idea that *yamato-uta* is interpreted as "greatly harmonized poetry" (discussed in Section 3):

I argue that this original idea that [languages of] the three kingdoms are harmonized [in Japanese poetry] is incorrect. Our kingdom has been a land of people descended from Brahma, and thus our language spoken from the Age of the Gods consists of mantras. [Some Japanese words and phrases] correspond to Sanskrit and some do not. This is because Sanskrit does not correspond substantially to the Buddha's mantra. [...] Buddha's mantras were translated into Sanskrit, the local written language in India, and the way in which they were translated is described as "harmonized [with a local language]." However, as Japanese is a spoken language used from the divine era, it corresponds with the Buddha's mantras.⁽⁵³⁾

We can see that Shōgei adopts Jien's argument that Japanese is similar to Sanskrit only to overturn it, by asserting that the Japanese language is directly descended from the Brahma, while Sanskrit (and by extension Sinitic) are derivations from that original, fundamentally Japanese, language. In this view, Japanese poetry is not merely a translation of Buddha's mantras but rather a manifestation of them. Shōgei's argument clearly overturns the center/periphery relationship between India and Japan by arguing that the diffusion of Buddhist teachings should not be measured by geographical distance.⁽⁵⁴⁾ However his – and Jien's – claims also bring with them important ramifications regarding translation. Both men successfully established unique translation theories regarding Japanese poetry

(51) Morrell, p.164-5.

(52) Tadami Fujioka ed., *Fukuro Zōshi (The Bag of Poetic Knowledge)*, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei vol. 29, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995, p.149.

(53) Motomasa Tokue ed., "Honkoku 'Kokin jochū' sono ichi" (Transcription of Annotation of the Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern, part 1), *Nihon Bungaku Ronkyū (The Journal of Japanese Literary Studies)* vol.46, 1982, pp.71-2, translation mine.

(54) Hideyuki Suzuki, *Chūsei gakuō to shintō: Ryōyo Shōgei no gakumon to shisō. (Medieval priests and shintō: Ryōyo Shōgei's scholarship and philosophy)*, Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2012.

as the manifestation of Buddha's mantras, by claiming that Japanese is either identical to Sanskrit or, more audaciously, to the original spoken language of Buddha.

Contemporary scholars have claimed that these medieval critics promoted a "nationalistic" agenda in asserting the superiority of Japanese poetry over other languages.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The arguments of medieval critics may indeed sound "nationalistic" inasmuch as they assert the distinctive character of Japanese language and poetry. However, I would argue that they didn't intend to draw a topography, which posited Japan as the center and other kingdoms such as India and China as the peripheries, but rather attempted to establish a worldview centered on Japanese poetry as the manifestation of mantras, which effectively transcends the geographical distances between India and Japan, unifying them as the Buddhist center. Shōgei's worldview can be confirmed in another passage from his treatise.

The name of Japan, "Yamato", derives from the fact that Kuninotokotachi no Mikoto, the God of Men, first established it as the kingdom of the active power. Since the god had the power, which had an effect of making things in great harmony, our kingdom was named after the power. However, as the name of our kingdom was established in the Age of the Gods, contemporary people never understand the derivation of it. Those who appreciate the name of Japan, "Yamato", and interpret it as "three kingdoms are harmonized" would never imagine that the name stands for its independence [*hitoridachi*, ヒトリダチ] of our kingdom.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Shōgei traced back to the dawn of the history of Japan and introduced Kuninotokotachi no Mikoto, who was described as one of the two gods to be born at the birth of the universe and established Japan in *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*) and *Nihonshoki* (*The Chronicles of Japan*). By referring to the name of the god "Kuninotokotachi", the Chinese characters of which literally meant "a kingdom always standing independently," Shōgei emphasized the "independence" of (the language of) the kingdom. This allowed him to deny the prevailing idea that languages of three kingdoms were greatly harmonized in the name of Japan and define Japanese poetry as the manifestation of mantras, not as "greatly harmonized poetry".

Jien and other medieval theorists experienced a drastic political change from a society governed by emperors and aristocrats to a society ruled by warriors. Scholars have pointed out that Jien, father was Fujiwara Tadamichi (1097-1164), the Chief Minister of the imperial court, and whose brother was Fujiwara Kanezane (1149-1207), the next Chief Minister, attempted to preserve the aristocratic tradition as well as Buddhism and transmit them to rulers of the feudal military government of the Kamakura Shogunate. Indeed, Jien frequently exchanged Japanese poems with Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199), the founder and the first shogun of the Kamakura Shogunate, and shared his thoughts on Buddhism with Yoritomo.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Existing studies picturing Jien as an advocate of the aristocratic and Buddhist traditions, however, have not fully assessed Jien's works. As I have shown in this section, Jien went further to theorize a sense of double belonging to communities, namely, Japan and the Buddhist community, and to conceptualize Japanese poetry as a bridge between these communities. Jien thus intended to persuade warriors to incorporate Japanese poetry and Buddhism as principles of governance into their political administration so that they could cultivate this sense of belonging to community and overcome the social instability caused by the shift of political powers.

If we define nationalism as an ideology that encourages an individual to identify with, or to feel a strong attachment to a community, then the ideas developed by medieval intellectuals were clearly more complex than simply a

(55) Masayuki Maeda, "Wakan to sangoku: kodai, chusei niokeru sekaizō to nihon (Japanese, Chinese and three kingdoms: the relations of the images of the world and Japan in ancient and medieval times)." *Nihon Bungaku* (*Japanese Literature*) vol. 52, 2003, p.22; Toyoo Ogawa, *Chūsei nihon no shinwa mojishintai* (*Myths, Letters, Bodies in Medieval Japan*). Tokyo: Shinwa Sha, 2014, pp.539-40.

(56) Tokue, p. 72.

(57) Mitsugu Anzai, "Yoritomo to jien no waka no zoutou nit suite" (On poetry exchanges between Yoritomo and Jien), *Nihon Bungaku Kenkyū* (*Japanese literary studies*), vol.46, 2007; Akito Kaneko, "Jien no ito: musa no yo ni okeru seitosei no soshutsu" (The Intention of Jien: the creation of legitimacy in the "musa no yo", *Bukkyo Daigakuin Kiyo* (*Bulletin of Graduate School of Literature, Bukkyo University*) vol.45, 2017.

nationalist response. Following the American scholar of history, Benedict Anderson's discussion of "imagined community", scholars of modern Japanese history have examined how Japanese classics such as Japanese poetry played an important role in cultivating people's sense of attachment to the modern nation-state of Japan.⁽⁵⁸⁾ The community of medieval Japanese theorists, however, was different from that of the community later imagined by nation-state of Japan; these medieval theorists valued Japanese poetry because it would give them a sense of belonging not only to the limited geography of Japan, but also to a much larger Buddhist community that extended to India and China as well.

Conclusion

I have examined how medieval poets and intellectuals explored translatability between Japanese poetry and other languages. First, I pointed out that medieval poets and intellectuals argued that Japanese poetry was seen as universally comprehensible not only to Japanese people but, in theory, to everyone in China and India, by emphasizing the features of the structure and categories of Japanese poetry rather than the phonic features of it. Second, I argued that medieval theorists established a worldview centered on Japanese poetry as the manifestation of mantras, which effectively transcends the geographical distances between India and Japan, unifying them as the Buddhist center. Medieval theorists valued Japanese poetry because it gave them a sense of belonging not only to the limited geography of Japan, but also to a much larger Buddhist community that extended to India and China as well.

I conclude that, while the modern discourses on translation of Japanese poetry reveal a strong attachment to the modern nation-state of Japan, the medieval perception that Japanese poetry is translatable showed a sense of belonging to a larger Buddhist community as well as a complexity of communities that medieval people belonged to. I contend that medieval translation theories, which may appear nonsensical, illuminate a different sense of community overlooked from a modern perspective.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Haruo Shirane; Tomi Suzuki ed., *Inventing Classics, Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature*, Stanford University Press, 2000; Fujii, Sadakazu, *Kokubungaku no tanjō* (The birth of Japanese literary studies), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000; Yoshikazu Shinada, *Man'yōshū no hakken: kokumin kokka to bunkasōchi toshiten no koten* (The invention of *Man'yōshū: the nation-state and classics as the cultural apparatus*) Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 2019; Shunji Matsuzawa, *Yomukoto no kindai: waka tanka no seijigaku* (Modernization of "reading" : politics of Japanese poetry (waka) and Japanese short-poem (tanka)), Tokyo: Seidosha, 2014.