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Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Idly Scribbling Rhymers: Poetry, Nation, and Community in 19th Century Japan »

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Abstract

Discussions of Japanese literary modernity generally center on prose fiction rather than poetic genres, despite the important role poetry played in premodern Japanese literary culture. This paper, however, foregrounds two traditional poetic genres, kanshi (Sinitic poetry) and waka (modern tanka), and their role in Meiji-era (1867-1912) discourses of national literature (kokubungaku 国文学). As Meiji critics grappled with the creation and kokushi 国詩),” they also attempted in tandem to delineate the boundaries of national-poetic community. Exploring the poetry and critical writings of Meiji poets Masaoka Shiki 正岡子規 (1867-1902), Yosano Tekkan 与謝野鉄幹 (1873-1935), and kanshi poet Kokubu Seigai 国分青厓 (1857-1944), I highlight the fault lines and unstable boundaries of this national-poetic community, arguing that Japanese poetic modernity resisted the idea of nation and national-poetic community as synonymous. Tekkan, Seigai et al’s definitions of poetic community through exclusion and hierarchy – that is, who should not be a Japanese poet – complicate previous narratives of Meiji national literature that stress literary works as a focal point for visions of a cohesive national community.

In both kanshi and waka, political factionalism and notions of hierarchical masculinity were major fault lines in the national-poetic project. The 1870s popularity of quasi-erotic kanshi, the so-called “fragrant-style (Ch. xianglian ti, J. kōrentai 香奁体),” elicited attacks on practitioners as immoral, feminized, and corrosive to ‘proper,’ vigorous masculinity. With “fragrant-style” poems popular within the Meiji government, poetic masculinity became entangled with political factionalism, anti-government poets (notably Seigai) conflating poetics and politics to paint fragrant-style poets as weak and unworthy to represent the nation. Similar anxieties over poetic effeminacy influenced Meiji discussions on waka; despite government promotion of waka as a national poetry, as in the imperially-convened New Year’s Poetry Party (utakai hajime 歌会始) and official Bureau of Poetry (Outadokoro 御歌所), much Meiji discourse on waka reflected concerns that the genre’s themes of wistful love made it insufficiently ‘manly.’ As Tekkan condemned the Outadokoro as effeminate and waka as “women’s literature,” here too fault lines of gender and political factionalism disrupted the seemingly natural adoption of waka as a national poetry.