



Haruo Shirane, Tomi Suzuki, eds. *Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. xi + 333 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4105-7.



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Gender, National Identity, and the Japanese Canon

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The word “canon” originally referred to the scriptures and holy works of the Western religious tradition. But no doubt the word is most widely understood today as being implicated in the cultural battles, still raging in many of the academic institutions of North America, over the heritage of Great Books taught in our universities. Proponents of feminism and multiculturalism have rightly decried the Western canon as the refuge of conservatism and elitism—the home of those now beleaguered Dead White Males—which needs to be pried open to make room for women and minorities. Supporters of the canon—whose voices are not now quite as loud as they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s—have often taken the extreme position that this act would represent the end of civilization as we know it. These debates were bound to have an effect on the field of Japanese literary studies as it is practiced in North America, especially when coupled with similar debates, now in full swing in Japan, over the meaning and boundaries of “Japanese literature.” The effects of these debates have been especially perceptible during the last five years or so, but our skeptical and

disenchanted view of the secular scriptures of Japan’s national literature achieves a culmination of sorts, it seems to me, in *Inventing the Classics*. There is none of the shrill rhetoric and defensiveness that characterized discussions even several years ago. Instead, there is a comfortable consensus in the essays (which, incidentally, are written by Japanese and North Americans) about the constructiveness of literature and the literary canon; there is agreement among the authors that “literature,” as a set of masterpieces of unalterable, inherent value independent of the surrounding socio-historical context, does not exist.

I should state straightaway that this is a rich and informative book, and while it is a conference volume (its roots lie in a symposium on “Canon Formation: Gender, Nationalism, and Japanese Literature” held at Columbia University in March 1997), most of the essays included for publication work exceptionally well together to build up a coherent picture of the issues involved in canon formation in Japan. The word “canon” is used in a politically inflected sense in the volume to name “those texts that are recognized by established or powerful institutions” (p. 2). The underlying objective behind each of

the essays is to historicize the way certain texts are privileged as a Japanese “tradition,” particularly as this act of elevation relates to gender and national identity in modern times (p. 1). This is not to say, of course, that the canon is stable or uncontested. Shirane’s concluding essay, “Curriculum and Competing Canons,” does a good job of illustrating the vicissitudes of reception of certain works throughout Japanese history. He argues persuasively that there have always been multiple canons—Chinese, Confucian, Buddhist, native, and such—which were privileged by different groups at different times and which were rarely mutually exclusive. Anyone who has doubts about the constructedness of the canon—that certain works are given value at certain times by certain people with certain aims in mind—will find Shirane’s reflections illuminating as he traces the fate of works and genres over time.

The book is divided into four parts: “Nation Building and National Literature,” “Gender, Genre, and Cultural Identity,” “History to Literature, Performance to Text,” and “Language, Authority, and the Curriculum.” However, the essays in the first part on nation building and those in the third part on historical narratives and drama complement each other very much. They could just as easily have been placed together in a single section centering on the appropriation of new conceptions of literature in the process of nation building. The three essays on gender and genre, while interesting and informative, feel less integrated into the rest of the volume. More time could have been spent in the editing process or in the introduction linking gender to the problematic of nation building. It is unfortunate that this was not done, because those three essays are very good and very suggestive of the way gender is implicated in the reception of certain works. One of the jobs of a reviewer is to summarize the contents of the book, which in this case, means summarizing the essays that constitute it. I will here only address the major issues that arise in each essay, without pretending to exhaust the richness of the collection.

Konoshi Takamitsu’s essay, “Constructing Imperial Mythology,” traces the shifting fortunes of the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) across time from the eighth century to the present day, demonstrating that, while the latter was privileged over the former through most of Japanese history, they both functioned to legitimate imperial authority, albeit in different ways at different times. In the modern age, though, the *Kojiki* surges ahead of its counterpart in esteem and assumes its current status as a national classic with the advent of modern myth

studies in Japan. The text is then connected to national character and a national folk essence and is used to help legitimate anew the emperor system in its modern guise.

The essay by Shinada Yoshikazu on another eighth century text, the *Manyōshū* (The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), investigates how a poetry anthology that was read by only a handful of literate human beings at any given time before the late nineteenth century became a national poetry anthology that could help project an image of a unified national culture reaching back into the misty past. Shinada examines two currents in the reception of the anthology. The first, in the mid- to late Meiji period, represented the text as exemplary of a national unity stretching from the emperor to the common people. The second current, dating from the late Meiji to the Taisho period, reversed this “bottom-down” view of the anthology and, appropriating the German concept of folk songs, instead portrayed the text as a repository of *minyo* (folk songs) that could represent an enduring national spirit with roots in an age before the corrupting influence of foreign ideas.

Joshua Mostow’s essay, “Modern Constructions of *Tales of Ise*,” deals with the changing views of gender and genre in relation to the famous mid-Heian text. He demonstrates that the *Ise* attracted very little attention in the Meiji period since the Heian period was seen as effeminate and licentious. Elegance and love became associated with the tale in the Taisho period. In the prewar Showa years the tale was associated with “courtliness” (*miyabi*), which could easily link it to the emperor. This is a reception history that still affects contemporary interpretations of the *Ise* as Mostow demonstrates through the examination of some postwar readings of the text.

Tomi Suzuki’s essay, “Gender and Genre,” demonstrates the role played by Heian women’s poetic diaries and memoirs in the creation of the institution of modern Japanese literature. Let me single out two examples that she discusses in this rich essay. Under the ideology of phonocentrism in the 1880s and 1890s, which went hand in hand with the creation of a new literary language based on colloquial speech, Heian women’s diaries were valued as examples of prose in the native vernacular and thus elevated to the stature of national literature. With the emerging hegemony of the *shishōsetsu* (I-novel) in the 1920s, Heian women’s diaries were seen as early precursors of the unmediated expression of the self.

Linda Chance’s essay, titled “*Zuihitsu* and Gender: *Tsurezuregusa* and the *Pillow Book*,” examines the intertwined reception of Yoshida Kenkō’s *Tsurezuregusa* (Es-

says in *Idleness*, early fourteenth c.) and Sei Shonagon's *Makura no soshi* (The Pillow Book, late tenth c.) across time. Chance demonstrates that the generic term *zuihitsu* (miscellany) did not become associated with the two works until the Edo period, and it was not until the modern period that the term became firmly tied to the two texts. Since *Tsurezuregusa* was written by a man and the *Pillow Book* by a woman, prewar commentary typically treated Sei Shonagon's work as being a lesser text and as a mere prelude to the more lauded *Tsurezuregusa*.

David Bialock's essay on the *Heike monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike, ca. fourteenth c.) shows how the medieval martial tale was translated into the imported concept of a national epic representing the spirit of the people. When the modern disciplinary fields arrived in Japan, the *Heike* was transformed from a primarily historical work into a work of imaginative literature, and attention shifted to the text's literary qualities, especially the theme of impermanence. This transformation helped smooth over some unpleasant ideological implications having to do with the imperial throne, implications that would have been difficult to assimilate in the modern imperial age if the work were treated as history.

William Lee's essay, "Chikamatsu and Dramatic Literature in the Meiji Period," investigates the Chikamatsu boom in the 1890s and the role played by Tsubouchi Shoyo and scholars at the University of Tokyo in bringing the Genroku playwright to the attention of Meiji intellectuals and literary critics. Under the influence of Western categories of fiction, poetry, and drama, these men were able to conceive of the native theatrical tradition as a kind of literature and then sought for a preeminent playwright in the Japanese heritage. They settled on Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724). But, as Lee demonstrates, only Chikamatsu's *sewamono*, or domestic plays, were appropriated as "literature," while his historical pieces and kabuki plays were largely ignored. Furthermore, the stage performance and the theater tradition were considered less compelling elements than the dramatic text itself, now conceived as a "literary" work.

With the emergence of a national literary heritage in modern Japan, one might think that Chinese texts and Chinese studies were left in the dustbin of history, since they would appear to be less able to contribute to the construction of national identity in Japan. But Kurozumi Makoto's essay, "*Kangaku*: Writing and Institutional Authority," demonstrates how Chinese studies (*kangaku*) is always already implicated in "native literature," and how it plays a major part in the creation of Japan as a mod-

ern nation-state. One important example that Kurozumi gives is the pivotal role played by *kangaku*, especially Confucian texts, in shaping the ideas of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education.

Given the daunting richness and sweep of these essays, Haruo Shirane's introductory essay, "Issues in Canon Formation," understandably does not attempt to erect a framework that would encompass all of them, but instead raises more general issues and questions that arise in the volume: How is value generated and to what purpose? How does canon formation relate to the construction of national identity? Why are some genres preeminent at certain times (or stated in another way, why do we construct a literary history that declares some genres preeminent in certain epochs)? What is the relationship between elite and popular culture in canon formation? How is gender implicated in a tradition of great works? Nonetheless, when the essays are read straight through as a book in whatever order, a number of themes, problems, and historical figures are consistently foregrounded, and the historical transformation that underpins modern conceptions of a Japanese literary tradition becomes visible. Thus, one wishes that Shirane and Suzuki would have undertaken the admittedly difficult task of defining more fully the connective tissue joining the essays.

Let me be more specific about the common issues that arise when the book is grasped in its entirety, thereby suggesting that which is never fully developed in the introduction. Many of the essays focus on the reception of works in modern times, and it is indeed in the Meiji period that we see (arguably) the most radical transformation. We can read *Inventing the Classics* together with, for example, Suzuki Sadami's *Nihon no 'bungaku' o kangaueru* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1994) to draw out further the implications of the former. Under the impact of Western thought—whose own ideas about "literature" emerged fully only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the discourse on *bungaku* (literature) in Japan underwent a profound transformation. First, *bungaku*, which had referred to a wide range of texts, but primarily Confucian ethical and philosophical books, was reconfigured to correspond with Western ideas of imaginative literature. Next, Japan's classical heritage was rewritten within the broad contours of the newly imported categories of fiction, poetry, and drama. For example, the heterogeneous prose materials of the past—*monogatari*, *setsuwa*, and such—became examples of "fiction," while verse forms like *waka*, *renga*, and *kanshi* became subcategories of the new genre of "poetry." Indeed,

the privileging of poetry over fictional works that characterized premodern Japan is reversed in the Meiji period, and it would be fiction, and especially the *shosetsu*, that would become the dominant literary form in modern times, the lens through which the whole of the literary tradition would then be viewed. Finally, under the influence of Darwinian thought Japan's classical heritage was written into a grand teleological narrative of the progression of literary forms with the advance of civilization. This process took place in response to the needs of Japan as an emerging nation-state surrounded by aggressive Western powers. As Benedict Anderson has suggested in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), the modern nation-state is an "imagined community," whose need for a unified people with a strong sense of national identity can be fulfilled in part through the creation of a heritage of imaginative writings valuable to the whole of the society—inventing the classics indeed! For an Asian island nation surrounded by the threat of imperialism and colonialism, this newly created heritage served the dual purpose of being a list of great national works that could be held up to similar lists possessed by the Euro-American powers in order to demonstrate an equally glorious Japanese tradition of literary production.

Such, then, is the suggestive power of *Inventing the Classics*. The book fills an important gap in the field in that it is both a meditation on the construction of Japanese literature and a reception history of key works and genres in the Japanese canon. The book raises a host of pedagogical issues for both undergraduate classes and graduate seminars. How should we integrate a concern for gender into our reading lists for classes? Should our survey courses in Japanese literature be oriented around the same "classics" that the book questions? If not, how should they be organized? How should we integrate these historicist concerns with reception into our graduate seminars? Perhaps the most difficult and troubling issue of all is the place of "literature" in a Japanese studies program. *Inventing the Classics* will be the indispensable reference for any further discussion of these issues in the foreseeable future.

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