

The Intellectuals in Wartime: Poets and a Novelist who lived with the *Man'yōshū*

Summary

Introduction

Why did Japanese intellectuals cooperate with the Imperial Japanese Government to encourage people to support the war effort during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Pacific War (1940-1945)?

There are numerous definitions of war. In this book, I specifically focus on the role of war in relation to the literature during the aforementioned two wars. For this reason, I define 'war' in this book as below:

War is an armed conflict over power and wealth between different groups. It is a political means to achieve the goals, and in this process, murder is justified and legitimized. The wellbeing and rights of individuals are trampled and neglected in preference for achieving the objective.

This asymmetrical power dynamics between groups and individuals took an extreme shape in the 20th century. Even intellectuals who were supposed to have ethical and moralistic judgement, who valued the freedom of individuals, could not escape from the domination of authority. Yet, I think that it is an essential role of intellectuals, especially literary writers, to have critical attitudes and take action against war.

Japanese intellectuals experienced two great wars, the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War in the 20th century. Most of them cooperated with the Imperial Japanese Government conducting the wars. In this book, I focus on six prominent writers, Yosano Akiko, Saito Ryu, Handa Ryohei, Kitazono Katsue and Takagi Taku. All of them loved the *Man'yōshū*, the earliest extant anthology of waka poems.

The Imperial Japanese Government and Army used the *Man'yōshū* as a symbol of *Nippon seishin* (the traditional spirit of Japan) to encourage citizen participation in the wars. *Nippon seishin* describes the highly idealized relationship between the Emperor and the people, which is often compared to the parent-child relationship. The *Man'yōshū* is considered to be an embodiment of loyalty to the Emperors. The Imperial Japanese Government laid emphasis on loyalty in order to mobilize Japanese

people's sentiment. The *Man'yōshū* also contains the poems of brave soldiers, and they were used to fuel the fighting spirits of the people. Yet, at the same time, people could find solace in love songs and poems about nature in the *Man'yōshū*.

The six intellectuals that I will be writing of also found a source of comfort and inspiration in the *Man'yōshū* during wartime. I explore the reasons for their cooperation with the Government by analyzing their reception and interpretation of the *Man'yōshū*. The ultimate goal of this book is to reflect on their mistakes and reconsider the role of literature in the world today.

Chapter 1

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) was a poet and a journalist, famous for her anti-war poem “Kimi shini tamou koto nakare” [Thou Shalt Not Die] published during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). She had loved the the *Man'yōshū* since her teenage years. She opposed the blind praise of the traditionalists for the *Man'yōshū*, which was popular in the 1910s. On the contrary, her interpretation of the *Man'yōshū* was not limited to the narrow scope of Japanese literature. She recognized the unique qualities that the *Man'yōshū* possesses, arguing that it can contribute to universal humanity.

However, after the First Shanghai Incident (1932), she changed her liberal and pacifistic attitude and approved of the Japanese military intervention in China. She could not understand why Chinese citizens, even young university students, rallied with the Chinese National Revolutionary Army and fiercely resisted the Japanese Army. In her eyes, the ones to blame for the disastrous outcome of the resistance were the Chinese leaders. Later, she composed chauvinistic *tanka* poems (*Aikoku tanka*) during the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War. She believed that Imperial Japan established the best governance system, which the Japanese people united under the supreme leader, the Emperor of Japan. She hoped that China would develop a similar system. Yet, at the same time, she argued that if China failed to do so, military intervention by foreign powers should be necessary to “free innocent Chinese citizens” from “the evil Chinese leaders.”

In this chapter, I explore the reason for the drastic shift of her view on warfare. I conclude that when she faced the changing reality of China, she chose to turn blind eyes to the facts, which were incomprehensible to her, and held on to a biased political view stemming from her fierce loyalty to the Emperor of Japan. It does not mean that

she completely disregarded universal human rights and freedom, yet, her emphasis on humanitarian values was eventually replaced by approval of militaristic intervention under the name of “liberation.”

Chapter 2

Saito Ryu (1879-1953) was a general of the Imperial Japanese Army. After he retired from the Army under the orders of the Government in 1930, he concentrated on composing *tanka* poems and studying the *Man'yōshū*. He published *Man'yo meika kansho* (1935), which is a literary criticism of the *Man'yōshū*. In this book, he suggested that it is essential to analyze the relationship between the meanings of the poems and their rhythmic structure for a deeper understanding.

In the 2.26 Incident (1936), he assisted a group of young Imperial Japanese Army officers who attempted to carry out a coup d'état aiming for the reorganization of Japan. All of the officers were arrested, and most of them were executed. Ryu was arrested for being an accessory to insurrection and sentenced to 5 years in prison. One of the reasons for the coup d'état was to establish a strong national defence system for the potential war between Japan and the Soviet Union in China. Ryu heard the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in prison. He was convinced that the young officers' prediction was exactly “correct.” Rather than relying on violence, he determined to embrace and express their will in pragmatic ways.

After provisional release from prison in 1938, he started publishing chauvinistic books about the *Man'yōshū*. This time, he took a nationalistic approach towards the poems and abandoned his literary theory. However, Japan's defeat in WWII (1945) destroyed his determination. After the war, he chose to live a solitary life and never came back to the center stage of literature.

Chapter 3

Handa Ryohei (1887-1945) was a *tanka* poet, a disciple of Kubota Utsubo (1877-1967). His research on the *Man'yōshū* is remarkable. He upheld his academic attitude towards the *Man'yōshū* with stoic consistency and pursued the true meanings of the poems.

His intellectual approach was influenced by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy's humanitarianism. His empathy towards socially vulnerable people is a good example.

Interestingly, European Symbolism also inspired him as a poet. He was very much aware of his role as an artist and decided to step back from socialist movements. However, it does not mean that his interests were limited to the field of art. He criticized Government policies and expressed anger against injustice through *Jiji uta* (political *tanka* poetry dealing with social topics) from 1936 until he died in 1945. His deep love for nature and the people of Japan is notable. He was especially attached to the land as he grew up on a farm, and his adoration is reflected in several poems.

However, he composed many chauvinistic *tanka* poems during the Pacific War. Just like other poets, he had unshaken loyalty to the Emperor. Yet, the main reason for this is that he could not distinguish his patriotism from nationalism propagated by the Government when the Pacific War broke out. As the war progressed and the situation worsened, his deep love and care for the land and people of Japan were tragically swallowed up by more aggressive nationalism. Regrettably, he never defined his 'love' for the 'land' in his life and passed away without knowing the defeat of Japan.

Chapter 4

Imai Kuniko (1890-1948) was a *tanka* poet, a disciple of Shimaki Akahiko (1876-1926). She had loved the *Man'yōshū* since her teenagerhood, like Yosano Akiko. She found solace and inspiration in the *Man'yōshū* during the difficult times of her life.

As a young woman with ambition, she wanted to pursue an education in literature. However, her conservative father refused her wishes, and as a result, she ran away from home and headed to Tokyo. After her marriage, she left home again for Kyoto since she could not tolerate traditional family values. She devoted her time to religious service and mendicancy in 1922. After returning home, she endeavored to support young women who aspired to literature.

Her *Man'yo dokuhon* (1940) is a unique literary criticism of the *Man'yōshū*. In this book, she emphasized the purity of *Man'yo* poetry, revealing deep meaning and rich emotion in seemingly unremarkable poems. She extended her limitless affection to the smallest of creatures. Also, she had a remarkable ability to find beauty in the most subtle phenomena and express it in her poems. Not surprisingly, she and her disciples composed some notable *tanka* poems which highlighted the inhumanity of modern warfare in the anthology of her *tanka* circle called *Kyoko* [Light of the Mirror].

Yet, the anthology itself was made to express a chauvinistic message to the public. This ostensibly controversial attitude is attributed to the change of the nature of Kuniko's empathy. She was deeply concerned about the Japanese soldiers fighting in the harsh environments overseas, and women killed themselves with their children on the battlefield of Saipan Island. Sadly, she was not aware of the reality that it was the Japanese Government that inflicted great pain and suffering on them. She believed that her top priority in wartime was to defend the Emperor and *Kuni* (country) and blinded herself through loyalty to the Emperor.

Chapter 5

Kitazono Katsue (1902-1978) was a poet. His unique works were influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism, and had a significant impact on modern Japanese poetry. He exchanged letters with foreign poets such as Ezra Pound, James Laughlin and others before WWII. He was a true avant-garde poet who unceasingly pursued freedom.

He underwent interrogation by *Tokubetsu koto keisatsu* (Special Higher Police) in 1940. He was suspected of being a communist for his Surrealist poems. It was a false accusation, yet this experience traumatized him, which caused a change in his attitude towards literature and politics. After the interrogation, he declared support for the Government in his literary journal called *VOU*. He insisted that he had been pursuing the “ancient spirit of civilization” in the *Man'yoshu* through *VOU*, justifying his experimental writing style. He saw the ideal of poetry in the *Man'yoshu* since he thought that the poems captured the very essence of the world. According to him, thoughts and emotions must be “evoked” by vivid visual images rather than “explained.” He carefully avoided descriptions of emotions, sentiments and similes so that the poems could speak to the readers directly.

He composed chauvinistic poems (*Aikoku shi*) like other poets. However, against his intentions, his poems gave off an impression of emptiness and obscurity due to the highly experimental mode of writing.

He also created a style of poetry called *Kyodo shi* (poetry which expresses the ideal Japanese homeland) to promote local chauvinism (*Kyodo ai*) following Government policy. However, the euphoric images of the homeland expressed in the poems were extremely abstract, making it difficult for readers to grasp the chauvinistic message.

Just like other intellectuals in this book, he was blinded by the loyalty to *Kuni*, unable to criticize the Government. Moreover, he strongly opposed urbanization brought by the West since it caused the destruction of nature and the ideal homeland.

His relentless attempts to support the Government and protect the homeland was not appreciated as his approach was too unconventional. In fact, the nature of his *Kyodo ai* and that of Government promoted local chauvinism were quite different. Tragically, he was not aware of it.

Chapter 6

Takagi Taku (1907-1974) was a novelist, music critic, and scholar of German literature. He published “Uta to mon no tate” [Waka Poetry and Shield of the Clan] (1940), a historical novel of a *Man’yo* poet Otomo no Yakamochi, whose life was full of turbulence.

Kikuchi Kan (1888-1948), a president of the publishing company Bungeishunju, strongly recommended this novel for the Akutagawa Prize in 1940. Kikuchi intended to celebrate the ‘2600th year anniversary’ of the founding of Japan with the *Man’yo* novel. However, Takagi declined the offer because he was not satisfied with the quality of his work.

Before looking into this specific novel in detail, I’d like to present Takagi’s literary theory. He had three basic principles in writing historical novels:

1) First and foremost, an author should pursue the poetic truth. Creative imagination and poetical metaphor are essential, and they carry more weight than historical accuracy. It also should be noted that he was deeply inspired by Wagner’s “Der Ring des Nibelungen.” He found his ideal model in the epic style of storytelling.

2) Historical novels should serve the purpose of constructive social criticism. Takagi’s theory is based on the concept of ‘*entsprechen*,’ the German term for ‘*correspond*.’ Stories may take place in the past, yet the central themes of the stories must speak up to the present world.

3) An author should focus on the dynamic flow and change of space and time rather than the dramas of individual characters. In other words, space and time are not a mere background for human dramas but essentially the main ‘*characters*’ of historical novels.

He wrote some outstanding historical novels such as “Hoppo no seiza” [Northern Constellation] (1940), which described the vicious cycle of discrimination between conquerors and the conquered, and aggravating divisions within the conquered. The story was set in the Heian period (9th to 12th century) when the central authority of Japan tried to control the land of *Ezo*, whom the authority deemed to be barbarians. However, his intention behind this novel was to criticize the Sino-Japanese War. His sharp analysis of the structure of discrimination and its tragic consequence can be seen in this novel.

“Uta to mon no tate,” on the contrary, had some weaknesses. The protagonist Otomo no Yakamochi was not only a poet but also an editor of the *Man'yōshū*. Hence, Yakamochi became a popular figure during wartime as a symbol of loyalty to the Emperor. Takagi found this situation alarming and decided to stay away from the enthusiastic admiration for Yakamochi. However, his apparent detachment from the protagonist made it difficult for the readers to empathize with the character. In addition, Takagi left the position of Yakamochi in literature and politics ambiguous. The lack of clarity and emotional detachment from the main character weakened the novel as a whole, and the author himself considered it a failure.

As a novelist, he was extremely cautious about what he wrote and tried to stay away from enthusiastic chauvinism. Yet, regrettably, he published two chauvinistic books for children in 1944 and 1945, unaware of the critical situation of the Pacific War. His solid loyalty to the Emperor and *Kuni*, which were not expressed in his works for adult readers, had a strong presence in the children's books.

It is possible to argue that he let his guard down when he wrote books for children because obviously, he didn't need to defend his position from the young readers. This tendency can be seen among other intellectuals as well.

Conclusion

These six intellectuals had their own perspectives on politics and society. Also, they could evaluate the *Man'yōshū* as a literary work.

Except for Saito Ryu, who was a general, they were influenced by Western culture, art and literature. They understood the value of freedom and appreciated other cultures. However, all of them gradually changed their attitudes as the war progressed. WWI (1914-1918), the Jinan Incident (1928), the First Shanghai Incident

(1932), the New Order Movement (aiming to establish a strong national defense system), and '2600th Anniversary' Ceremony of the founding of Japan played pivotal roles in their lives. Through those events, their loyalty toward the Emperor and *Kuni* was strengthened. Saito Ryu decided to dedicate his life to the Emperor and *Kuni* (*Junkoku*), and the rest chose to show their loyalty to the Emperor and *Kuni* through actions, such as composing chauvinistic poems (*Hokoku*).

However, here is an important question. What is *Kuni*? *Kuni* is a highly ambiguous term to define. Depending on context, it can be the land, the nation, the historical and cultural identity, and the state. Furthermore, it means *Kokutai* (national body) before the Constitution of Japan was created in 1946. *Kuni* and *Kokutai* were interchangeable to some extent during wartime. However, *Kokutai* entails not only *Kuni* but also the mythicized unbroken lineage of the Emperor. It was believed that a single line of emperors ruled Japan ever since the creation of the country.

Ultimately, the intellectuals who appeared in this book could not identify what they truly wanted to protect, except for Saito Ryu, who attempted to defend *Kokutai*. The five intellectuals were attracted by the magic word *Kuni*, and cooperated with the Government.

Lessons can be learned from their lives. It is essential to keep asking what causes war without being overwhelmed by the emotions and the atmosphere of society. What makes us 'enemies' and 'allies,' and why do those terms trample humanity? Those issues must not be buried in the past and forgotten as there are still many ongoing wars razing the world at this very moment.