

# *Kanbunmyaku*

*The Literary Sinitic Context and the  
Birth of Modern Japanese Language and Literature*

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**BRILL**

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If we understand "literature" from the Meiji period in this way, Mori Ōgai, a representative figure of Meiji literature, emerges as important, because he was fully aware of the public-private dualism and endeavoured to realize it in his own life. That Ōgai excelled in Literary Sinitic poetry is now commonly known. He was born as the first son of the feudal lord's official physician at the Bureau of Medicine\* in Tsuwano (present-day Shimane prefecture) in 1862. He was trained in Literary Sinitic in his youth and also studied at Yōrōkan,† a local domain school, where he cultivated his education in Sinitic Learning. It is also well known that he was interested in Literary Sinitic poetry from an early age and throughout his life, and that Literary Sinitic has an unmistakable

\* Physician  
(*goten'i*  
御典医);  
Bureau of  
Medicine  
(*Ten'yakuryō*  
典藥寮).

† Yōrōkan  
養老館.

明治十七年八月二十三日午後六時汽車發東京。抵橫濱。投於林家。此行受命在六月十七日。赴德國  
 修衛生學兼詢陸軍醫事也。七月二十八日詣闕拜天顏。辭別宗廟。八月二十日至陸軍省領封傳。初余  
 之卒業於大學也。蚤有航西之志。以爲今之醫學。自泰西來。縱使觀其文。諷其音。而苟非親履其境。則  
 鄧書燕說耳。至明治十四年叨辱學士稱。賦詩曰。一笑名優質却辱。依然古態聳吟肩。觀花僅覺眞歡  
 事。題塔誰誇最少年。唯識蘇生愧牛後。空歎阿遯若鞭先。昂々未折雄飛志。夢駕長風萬里船。蓋神已  
 飛於易北河畔矣。未幾任軍醫。爲軍醫本部僚屬。蹣跚執掌。汨沒于簿書案牘之間者。三年於此。而今  
 有茲行。欲母喜不可得也。

FIGURE 15 *Diary of a Westbound Voyage* (Kōsei nikki)

presence in his oeuvre. In addition, Nagai Kafū looked up to Ōgai as a teacher and admired him throughout his life. In fact, his *Compendium of Stories from Shitaya* is a work within which Kafū emulated Ōgai's style of historical biography to memorialize Ōgai. In that sense, drawing a genealogy from Mori Ōgai to Nagai Kafū is a meaningful exercise.

The passage quoted below begins at the end of the second line in Figure 15.<sup>39</sup>

In any case, to understand what literature meant to Ōgai, it is useful to look at his works before he gained fame as a "Literary Giant."\* At the starting point of our inquiry is his Literary Sinitic poetry. After graduating from the University of Tokyo, Mori Ōgai (born Mori Rintarō) traveled to Germany in 1884 to study in the capacity of a military physician. He kept records of his journey to Germany in his *Diary of a Westbound Voyage*,† a travelogue written in Literary Sinitic that also reveals the reason for his decision to study abroad. The passage below was written by him in Literary Sinitic when he was in his twenties:

\* "Literary giant" (*bungō* 文豪).

† *Kōsei nikki* 航西日記.

My original ambition was to study in the West after graduating from university. Inasmuch as modern medical science comes from the West, even if one reads the literature and can recite its contents, unless one treads upon its soil in person, one's efforts are but a case of "A letter from Ying getting misinterpreted in Yan." So it was in 1881 (Meiji 14) that, unworthy as I am, I was conferred a medical degree, at which time I composed the following poem:<sup>40</sup>

39 Cited from Kawaguchi Hisao, *Bakumatsu Meiji kaigai taiken shishū* (Daitō bunka daigaku Tōyō kenkyūjō, 1984).

40 Unpublished translation (and four accompanying footnotes) courtesy of John Timothy Wixted. Cf. renderings by Nakai Yoshiyuki, "The Young Mori Ōgai (1862–1892)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1974), 65; and Richard John Bowring, *Mori Ōgai and the Modernization of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 9. The original poem reads as follows:

一笑名優質却辱 一笑す名は優にして質は却て辱なるを  
 依然古態聳吟肩 依然として古態 吟肩を聳やかす  
 觀花僅覺眞歡事 花を觀て 僅かに覺ゆ 眞歡事  
 題塔誰誇最少年 塔に題するも 誰にか誇らん 最少年

What a laugh, a great actor, but in substance weak:  
 Still the same pose, shoulders raised, blithely reciting poems.<sup>41</sup>  
 Out flower-viewing with classmates, he feels little true  
 enjoyment;  
 What matter that, among those “inscribed on the stupa,” he can  
 boast of being youngest?<sup>42</sup>  
 He only knows: he feels shame (for placing low in his class) at  
 being the “ox behind” Master Su warned of,  
 One who, for no good reason, let Friend Ti (his classmate Miura)  
 “apply the whip first” (and finish at the top of the class—to  
 be rewarded with further study in Europe).<sup>43</sup>

唯識蘇牲愧牛後  
 唯だ蘇生の牛後を愧じるを識るも  
 Munashiku ateki o shite bensen o chakuseshimu  
 空しく阿遜をして鞭先を着せしむ  
 Kōkō to shite imada kujikezu yūhi no shi  
 昂昂として未だ折けず 雄飛の志  
 Yume wa chōfū ni gasu banri no fune  
 夢は長風に駕す 萬里の船

41 Ōgai is saying that with his prestigious degree he can now call himself a doctor. But behind the mask he really is “in substance weak.” In a poem of the previous year, he had similarly spoken of his academic achievement in sardonically disparaging terms: “精神廿年空突屹.” *Seishin nijūnen munashiku tokkitsu su*. “Twenty years’ intense application—such ‘majestic soaring’ for nought,” and referring to a kind of play-acting on his part in his early years: “I feel ashamed at how, cockily confident of my talent, I counted on my age [to impress and show up others]” 羞我負才又恃齡 (*Hazu ware no sai o tanomi mata yowai o tanomu o* 羞我負才又恃齡).

42 The reference here is to drinking parties under flower blossoms that would take place after examination results were posted at the end of the school year. Ōgai was unable to enjoy his graduation outing, out of disappointment at finishing eighth in his class of twenty-eight—not as one of the top two who were sent to Europe. Successful examination candidates in the Tang dynasty were said to have inscribed their names on a stupa in the most famous temple of Xi’an. Ōgai poses the rhetorical question, among my cohort who was the youngest? He was, of course. But the achievement gives him little satisfaction, for his heart had been set on being sent to Germany, a hope now dashed. The ironic stance is confirmed in the next couplet.

43 “Master Su” refers to Su Qin 蘇秦 (380–284 BCE), a Spring and Autumn Period strategist who warned the king of Han not to give allegiance to the expanding state of Qin 秦, saying, “Better to be a chicken’s mouth, not an ox’s behind” (寧為鷄口、無為牛後). “Friend Ti” alludes to Zu Ti 祖逖, close companion of Liu Kun 劉琨 (270–317). (“Friend” approximates the prefix expressing familiarity.)

Loftily proud yet unbending, with aspirations of heroic flight,  
 He dreams of mounting the long wind on a ten thousand-league  
 ship.<sup>44</sup>

My spirit was already flying over the banks of the Elbe River. But before long, I was appointed an army physician and became attached to medical headquarters. Marking time and feeling put upon, for three years I drowned in ledgers, reports, memos, and letters. Then came this trip. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t contain the joy inside me.

## 11 Mori Ōgai’s Self-Consciousness

Mori Ōgai composed the poem above upon his graduation from the University of Tokyo (which was yet to become an Imperial University) in July of 1881; it is a perfect example of how Ōgai’s sense of selfhood was formed within the Literary Sinitic Context. Regardless of how we should understand the latter half of his poem, the first four lines, which illustrate the core of his self-consciousness, have been the subject of various interpretations. For now I refrain from discussing the details. Some proposed that “a name outstanding” meant “famous actor [or entertainer].” Disagreements followed and elicited further disagreements with those disagreements—a rather vociferous debate. We have reliable annotations and translations of Mori Ōgai’s Literary Sinitic poetry in the multi-volume *Collected History and Literature of Ōgai*.<sup>45</sup> The following is a prose paraphrase of the opening two couplets.

“Doctor of medicine” may be splendid as a title;  
 but being physically weak, I’m still the same laughing-stock.  
 After graduation, much in the way I did before,  
 I go on reciting Literary Sinitic poetry.

The official history of the time records that Liu “was ever fearful that Master Zu would ‘apply the whip first’ [i.e., get a jump on him in career advancement]” (常恐祖生先吾著鞭). Zu Ti is a reference to Ōgai’s classmate, Miura Moriharu, discussed below.

44 Ōgai’s aspirations remain grand, his dream intact of making the journey to Europe that would crown his earlier achievement and lead to further triumph.

45 Volumes 12 and 13 (2000–1), *Kanshi* 漢詩, annotated and edited by Kotajima Yōsuke 古田島洋介 (in the 13-volume Iwanami shoten series, *Ōgai rekishi bungakushū* 鷗外歴史文學集).

But out flower-viewing (as was customary among successful examination candidates in China who would banquet under apricot blossoms), I can at last feel joy well up inside.

After all, among the graduates who is the youngest? (I am.)

The line *Izen to shite kotai ginken o sobiyakasu*<sup>46</sup> is here paraphrased as “After graduation, much in the way I did before, I go on reciting Literary Sinitic poetry.” The phrase *ginken o sobiyakasu* refers to *kanshi* recitation, explicated as “to straighten one’s shoulders and recite poetry.” *Gin* is a prefix attached to nouns linked to recitation: as here, where the poet straightens his “poetry-reciting shoulders.”<sup>47</sup> One might note that in the second of Zhu Xi’s “Two Poems Dedicated to “Refuting the ‘Invitation to Hiding’” by Liu Mingyuan and Song Zifei,”<sup>48</sup> the second line reads: “There is nothing to prevent raising our ‘poetry-reciting shoulders’ (i.e., reciting poems) together at leisure.”<sup>49</sup> Some commentators have argued that this type of recitation connotes raising one’s voice in heroic style. A case in point is Kojima Noriyuki’s *The Weight of Words* (*Kotoba no omomi*, 1984), where the Ōgai passage is interpreted along the lines of “I, as before, in the stalwart style of an unlettered rube, raise my shoulders and let loose in loud song, all the time taking long strides.”

The expression *sobiyakasu* (to raise up or thrust upright) may conjure up something along the lines just outlined, but Ōgai’s expression in fact goes with the first line of the poem by Zhu Xi cited above: “Glory or shame, adversity or success—they are but mere chance”; in other words, whether one’s career advances or is thwarted, is simply fate.<sup>50</sup> Since Zhu Xi includes “at leisure” when referring to “poetry-writing shoulders,” Kojima’s interpretation of the Ōgai line seems misguided.

46 依然古態聳吟肩。

47 And Ōgai in another *kanshi* speaks of treading distant mountains in “poetry-reciting sandals” 吟鞋 (*gin'ai*).

48 次劉明遠宋子飛反招隱韻二首。

49 未妨闕共釜吟肩。Liu Mingyuan and Song Zifei are personal names. The phrase “Refuting the ‘Invitation to Reclusion’” alludes to a poem by Wang Kangju 王康瑀 (ca. 400) of Jin 晉. For a translation by Burton Watson, see *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 175.

50 榮醜窮通祇偶然。

Similarly, Su Shi of the Southern Song once wrote a poem entitled “Presented to the ‘Flourishing Talent’ He Chong,”<sup>51</sup> containing the lines,

Also, have you not seen  
Meng Haoran riding a donkey in the snow,  
Brows knit as he recites poetry, his shoulders thrust-up mountains?

又不見雪中騎驢孟浩然 *You bu jian xue zhong qi lu Meng Haoran*  
皺尾吟詩肩聳山 *Zhou wei yin shi jian song shan*

Meng Haoran<sup>52</sup> is described as being removed from the world, immersed in poetry—precisely what Mori Ōgai was trying to communicate about himself. To provide some additional information, Meng Haoran was a poet from the High Tang period (712–762). He never entered officialdom and spent his life in seclusion. His poems are favorably recited in Japan. The phrase “In spring I sleep, unaware that dawn has broken”<sup>53</sup> is from one of his poems.

If we interpret Ōgai’s words in the second line in the above way, its relationship with the phrase in the first line becomes clearer. His newly attained title upon graduation from university was the rather grand-sounding “bachelor of arts,” but he had a weak constitution by nature—the weakness here seems to be metaphorical, rather than physical. That is, the substance of his degree was in fact not as impressive as it seemed. After all, his graduation did not lead to a career as a government bureaucrat and as a result, he is back to reciting poetry just as he was prior to earning his university degree.

## 12 The Framework of Official Career vs. Reclusion\*

Seeing him in such a state, dedicated readers of Mori Ōgai’s works might be reminded of the following passage from the opening of his *Biography of Hōjō Katei*:<sup>54</sup>

51 Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), “Presented to the ‘Flourishing Talent’ He Chong” (Zeng xiezhen He Chong xiucui 贈寫真何充秀才).

52 Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740).

53 *Shunmin akatsuki o oboezu.*

春眠不覺曉 しゅんみん あかつき おぼ 春眠 曉を覺えず

54 In Japanese the work is simply *Hōjō Katei* 北条霞亭 (1917).

\* Official career (*shi* 仕) vs. reclusion (*in* 隱).