

SUGAWARA NO MICHIZANE AND THE EARLY HEIAN COURT, by Robert Borgen. Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1986. Pp. xiv + 431. \$22.

Reviewed by
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Robert Borgen's study of Sugawara no Michizane is a fine work in the "life and times" style of biographical writing. The author has carefully studied a wealth of relevant material, both primary and secondary, and has given us a detailed study of the famous ninth-century poet, scholar, bureaucrat, and diplomat—one that is balanced and dispassionate, graced with an occasional touch of humor.

In the course of his work, Borgen treats the reader to extended essays that are at times more interesting than Michizane himself—on the university, on diplomatic exchanges with Parhae (Po-hai), and on

the later apotheosis of Michizane. These are extremely useful, even engrossing—certainly more so than the more or less deadly *majime* subject of the study and the bureaucracy-related vicissitudes in his life. Borgen also manages to outline the organization of the early Heian administrative and court system in clear and mercifully short terms. He offers exemplary notes.

In short, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* is a very good work of historical scholarship. It is, nevertheless, considerably less successful as a literary study. Perhaps this is as was intended, for the author says he “will focus on his [Michizane’s] career as a scholar, poet, and court official, with passing attention to Tenjin-sama’s legendary deeds” (p. 5). As for Michizane’s poetry, Borgen offers clear and reliable, but rather prosy, translations of several of the poet’s kanshi, with appended explication of what would otherwise be unclear allusions. Yet, apart from general references to Po Chü-i and the theme of sorrow in earlier Chinese poetry, we have no real comparison of Michizane’s poetry with Chinese models (although the author, to his credit, does point to some such studies in his notes). Nor do we see where Michizane the poet fits into the later traditions of Japanese kanshi or waka poetry. Nor is there literary analysis, in any sense of the word, of work by Michizane that is presented. Indeed, literary texts simply buttress the biography.

This is not as bad as it sounds. It is akin to Arthur Waley’s “life and times” studies of Li Po, Po Chü-i, and Yüan Mei. And in itself such a study does offer the reader a great deal. I simply point out the deficiency, however, both so that the reader does not have undue expectations and as a call for some scholar eventually to tackle the real challenge of telling us exactly what distinguishes Michizane as an author. Is he indeed a great writer, and if so, in what ways?

Borgen draws on apt, recent scholarship on the Chinese background to the issues he brings up (e.g., on the examination system and on the Taoist background to “whistling”). Here, he distinguishes himself from the vast majority of Japanologists, who repeatedly misromanize and mistranslate Chinese names and terms and who seem content with the most perfunctory citation of Chinese background sources (relying on such “recent” scholarship as Giles’ biographical dictionary).

The author develops one important literary point. In arguing that kanshi offered (at least in some cases) greater potential for personal

expression than the more restricted length and range of acceptable topics available in Japanese verse forms, Borgen gives the lie to much of the received wisdom that contrasts these two modes of expression. Michizane wrote some less-than-memorable, pro forma occasional verse in Chinese. He wrote some uninspired verses in the traditional Chinese personae of the recluse, poor scholar, and the like. And he wrote a number of little tours de force in the more confining Chinese genres (regulated verse and quatrain). But he also wrote poems of real feeling in these genres, and especially ones in the old-style genre (unlimited as to length and less confined in terms of tonal regulation). Surely all of this suggests the complexity of trying to make any informed contrast between the traditions of kambun and native Japanese writing.

There are points where one can disagree with the author, e.g., his loose application of the term "pragmatic" in the first chapter. He occasionally uses a colloquialism that seems out of place given the tone of the surrounding material (e.g., on p. 151, "the whole picture"). And both author and editor were asleep (on pp. 78-79) when the following got into print: "The principal advantage given Japanese aristocrats, however, did not lay [sic] in the education or examination systems. . . ." (There are some other oversights, as well, but fortunately they are not many.)

The book itself is a very fine piece of textual design, the handiwork of Adrienne Onderdonk Dudden for the Harvard Council on East Asian Studies. Type face, layout, and choice of paper harmonize beautifully, together with the interspersed scroll illustrations. (Would that the author had elaborated more on this last dimension.)

A rich variety of material on Michizane has become available in English over comparatively recent years: the section on the poet in the first volume of Burton Watson's *Japanese Literature in Chinese*, the material on him in Helen Craig McCullough's *Ōkagami* translation, the chapter devoted to him in *The Nobility of Failure* by Ivan Morris, and the treatment of the Michizane legend in Makoto Ueda's translation of the Noh play "The Old Pine Tree," in Stanleigh H. Jones, Jr.'s rendering of the puppet drama *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*, and in the art history dissertation by Miyeko Murase, "The Tenjin Engi Scrolls—A Study in their Genealogical Relationship." The Borgen historical study is a welcome addition to this corpus—one that awaits its literary complement.