

Commentaries and Commentary Modes in Japanese Literary Tradition Based on the Examples of the Classical Poetry Anthologies

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Abstract: Classical studies were the mainstream of Far Eastern traditional culture. A survey of the relationship between classics and their commentaries is central for an understanding of the intellectual history of the countries of the Far East, of which Japan is one. Commentaries paid tribute to the canonization of literary monuments but did this without regard for the artistic and intellectual character of the classical text. Commentaries to the classical texts of ancient Japan, in particular, to the first poetic anthology *Man'yōshū* (“Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves”), are taking shape in the Heian era (9th–12th) as an attempt to restore the Japanese outlook on this poetry written in the 8th century in Japanese, but in Chinese characters. This classical poetry acquired a new form in the 9th century: now it was written in *kanji* and Japanese syllabary (*hiragana*). Several types of literary criticism existed: treatises on literary works, commentaries on classical monuments, compilation of anthologies (selection of literary texts for the constitution of complex collections), as well as poetic contests. Commentators mostly concentrated on understanding the meaning of separate words and phrases, but the general meaning of the text remained out of the scope of their attention.

Keywords: Japanese classical tradition, literary text, commentaries, *Man'yōshū*, *Kokinwakashū*.

Commentary as a Way to Understand Classical Tradition

The most surprising quality of a medieval thinker in the Far East is that they organized their ideas around a religious or literary text and expressed them by means of commentaries. Chinese researcher Chou Yū-t'ung wrote in his work *Classical Books, Study of Classical Books, History of the Study of Classical Books* that studying classical literature became the mainstream of, first, Chinese, and, later, Japanese feudal culture [Chou Yū-t'ung 1983, p. 3]. Of similar opinion is Honda Shigeyuki, a Japanese researcher and the author of an extensive work *History of the Study of Chinese Classics*, who believed that the study of the classics had structured literature, philosophy, science, and sometimes dominated them all. The study of relations between the canonical texts of the tradition and commentaries to them is of central importance for the understanding of the intellectual tradition of the Far Eastern countries [Honda 1975, p. 25]. Japanese researcher Hiraoka Takeo wrote, for example, that, in the Song era (960–1279), the mainstream of classical literary studies and philosophy in China consisted in studying and commenting on the *Si Shu* (“The Four Books”, 12th century), i.e., the four books of the Confucian tradition: the *Chunqiu* (“The Spring and Autumn Annals”, ?–235 BC), the *Lun Yu* (“The Analects”, or “The Analects of Confucius”, ca. 485 BC), *Mengzi* (“Mencius”, 4th – 3rd c. BC), and the *Zhongyong* (“Doctrine of the Mean”, according to the latest findings, 3rd c. BC) [Hiraoka 1946, p. 37].

Like in other Far Eastern cultures, Japanese commentaries developed, first, around the central religious texts – Shinto, Buddhist, Confucian ones – and, only after that, around fiction. Here, we will mainly focus on the commentaries to the medieval literary monuments. They contributed to the canonization of literary monuments, incorporating contemporary knowledge in various fields. As early as in the early medieval period (the Heian era, 9th – 12th cc.), there appeared commentaries on ancient classical texts, in particular, on the first Japanese anthology of poetry *Man'yōshū* (“Collection of Ten Thousand

Leaves” 8th c.)¹ as an attempt to recreate the Japanese appearance of this poetry, written in the 8th century in Chinese characters; this classical poetry looked different when written in a Japanese way, that is, with a combination of a few *kanji* with the Japanese syllabaries *hiragana* or *katakana*.

The Appearance of First Commentaries on a Literary Text

The first Japanese poetic anthology is *Man'yōshū*, where all 4,516 poems were written in Chinese characters, as Japanese phonetic writing did not exist yet – it was invented (created from simplified handwritten versions of Chinese characters) only in the first half of the 9th century. V. N. Goreglyad, a renowned Japanese Studies scholar from Saint Petersburg, writes: “There is no doubt that *Man'yōshū* is a unique phenomenon of world literature. At the dawn of its written culture, not having a full-fledged system of wiring the sounds of their native language, the Japanese wrote a huge poetic anthology, which for centuries was a literary example for their future generations and which, for more than a millennium, is an object of study of literature scholars, historians, culturologists, ethnographers, linguists, etc.” [Goreglyad 1997, p. 75]

The *kanji* were borrowed from China in the 8th century. The authors of the anthology produced a way to write Japanese poems called *man'yōgana*, where *kanji* were used either phonetically or as ideograms. That is, *kanji* performed the functions of a syllabary denoting auxiliary words, paradigms of verbs, nouns, or adjectives. “Of decisive importance

¹ The poems included in the *Man'yōshū* were generally called *waka* (“Japanese songs”), even though they belonged to the differing genres of *tanka* (“short songs”), *nagauta* (“long songs”), *sedōka* (“six-liners”), etc. By the 9th century, many genres, except for the five-line *tanka*, consisting of 31 syllables, faded into obscurity, so later anthologies include almost exclusively only *tanka*. Therefore, *waka* and *tanka* became synonymous.

is the system of writing Japanese poems with *kanji*: phonetic writing had not been invented yet and using *kanji* to relay the meaning of the words was impractical, as they do not reflect the sound of a poem” [Goreglyad 1997, p. 76]. Such system of writing was preserved until, in the early 9th century, the Japanese created the syllabary alphabets *katakana* and *hiragana*.

The Chinese language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family; the literary language of *wenyan*, the characters of which were borrowed, is an isolating language, i.e. one consisting of only roots. The Japanese language is not related to the Chinese, and it is an agglutinative language, in which there are changing words and auxiliary words. Therefore, the Chinese writing system was applied to a non-related language functioning by other rules.

When we look at the original texts of the *Man'yōshū*, we see rows of *kanji*, i.e., the text looks like a Classical Chinese one, but the paradox is that it cannot be read in Chinese because the auxiliary words of the Japanese language written in *kanji* would prevent a Chinese reader from understanding the text correctly. In modern academic editions, this text is presented as the “original” (*genbun*) – this word is placed in square brackets before the text. The text contains no directions on how to read these rows of *kanji* in Japanese, and Japanese scholars still argue about various ways of reading them. It does not contain any directions about the sounds or the pronunciation of these characters.

We can only rely on the centuries of canonical reading of these characters in Japanese, which “translated” these *kanji* into familiar native sounds or, rather, the sounds which were worked out by the poetry of Imperial anthologies since the *Kokinwakashū* (“Collection of Old and New Songs of Japan”, 905) and which are familiar to us. Many scholars believe that only since the 10th century, when the *Kokinwakashū* poetry, with its strict codification, was created, it became clear how to read the *Man'yōshū* poems.

Meanwhile, *Man'yōshū* is the first truly Japanese poetic anthology, and, before mid-8th century, Japanese poets only created Chinese-language anthologies in Chinese genres. Reading *Man'yōshū*, we can

only rely on the work of medieval commentators who recreated this text in Japanese writing as a result of centuries of academic commentaries and gave the text the appearance we see now, “domesticated” it.

This Japanese spelling out of the text is preceded by a clarification in square brackets: “*kun* reading”, i.e., Japanese reading of the Chinese characters of the original. In the Japanese version, the poems of the anthology are, generally speaking, comprehensible even to a modern reader without translation into the modern language, while the “original”, Sinicized version presents great difficulties and takes many years of training to read. A question arises: which should be considered the original, and which the copy? Is the original text, written in the 8th century in Chinese characters, the original, or is the text “translated” into Japanese writing the original? The main academic series of Japanese literary classics (Iwanami Shoten, Shōgakukan, Shinchōsha) provide the “Japanese” variants of the poems (*kanji* + *hiragana*), where the “alien” text becomes “domesticated”, i.e., the text has been read in Japanese and “converted” into a more understandable form. The texts of *Man’yōshū* edited by Satake Akihiro in the Iwanami Shoten edition [Man’yōshū 1957–1962] and the texts edited by Kojima Noriyuki in the Shōgakukan edition [Man’yōshū 1990–1997] are almost identical. Does the graphics of the text influence its understanding, or are the rows of Chinese characters only an outside appearance of a “long song” (*nagauta*) by a famous ancient poet Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (and all other poems of the anthology in various genres)? Should one ignore the Chinese characters completely or take into consideration only the Japanese variant with *hiragana*?

This is not a unique problem, and there is an earlier example: Sumer characters and Assyrian language. Most scholars, both in the Japanese and Sumer studies fields, believe that the rows of Chinese characters of *man’yōgana* do not matter for understanding the Japanese meaning of the poem, like Sumer characters do not matter for understanding Assyrian texts. Writing in *man’yōgana* is only a temporary measure, historically necessary due to the lack of an own writing system, before the syllabaries were invented in the early 9th century. Nevertheless, the

process of translating the classical literary canon from Chinese characters into Japanese writing mixed with some *kanji* required a lot of effort from anonymous medieval commentators. Japanese text researchers believe that later commentaries on literary texts grew from the enormous work to “translate” Chinese characters into the mixed Japanese writing system (*kanji* + *hiragana* syllabary). The following example of a poem from *Man'yōshū*, the Japanese text of a *nagauta* (“long song” No. 36 in the fragment), written in Chinese characters in the 8th century, is not read in Chinese:

[原文]安見知之 吾大王 神長柄 神佐備世須登 <芳>野川 多藝津河内
尔 高殿乎 高知座而 上立 國見乎為<勢><婆> 疊有 青垣山 々神乃 奉御
調等 春部者 花挿頭持 秋立者 黄葉頭<刺>理 [一云 黄葉加射之] <逝>
副 川之神母 大御食尔 仕奉等 上瀬尔 鶺川乎立 下瀬尔 小網刺渡 山川
母 依弓奉流 神乃御代鴨

The following text from *Man'yōshū*, a Japanese text, which was recorded in mixed writing, *kanji* and Japanese syllabary, apparently, in the 9th century, is read in Japanese:

[訓読]やすみしし 我が大君 神ながら 神さびせすと 吉野川 たぎつ
河内に 高殿を 高知りまして 登り立ち 国見をせせば たたなはる 青
垣山 山神の 奉る御調と 春へは 花かざし持ち 秋立てば 黄葉かざせ
り [一云 黄葉かざし] 行き沿ふ 川の神も 大御食に 仕へ奉ると 上つ
瀬に 鶺川を立ち 下つ瀬に 小網さし渡す 山川も 依りて仕ふる 神の
御代かも²

² In the English translation by the Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai: Our great Sovereign, a goddess / Of her sacred will / Has reared a towering palace / On Yoshinu's shore, / Encircled by its rapids; / And, climbing, she surveys the land. / The overlapping mountains, / Rising like green walls, / Offer the blossoms in spring / And with autumn, show their tinted leaves, / As godly tributes to the Throne. / The god of the Yū River, to provide the royal table, / Holds the cormorant-fishing / In its upper shallows, / And sinks the fishing-nets / In the lower stream. / Thus the mountains and the river / Serve our Sovereign, one in will; / It is truly the reign of a divinity [Manyōshū 1965, p. 29]. For Russian translation, see [Man'yōshū 1971, pp. 81–82].

Types of Literary Criticism and Commentaries in the Medieval Period

Besides translating the most important ancient poetic, mythological, and historical texts into the Japanese writing system in the early medieval period, the commentators mostly focused on uncovering the meaning of particular words and combinations of words, their subtext and factual background.

There were several types of literary criticism: treatises on literature and commentaries on literary classics. Treatises on literature, in turn, required commentaries, clarifications, interpretations, translations into the language of various eras up to the contemporary language of academic editions of classical texts. Treatises were created by teachers, outstanding poets and writers. Often, a teacher would not write anything down, but only spoke (in an allegoric way), and his words were later written down by his disciples.³ Spoken word was perceived

³ This how *Lun Yu* by Confucius, the main book of Confucianism, was composed. It included the Teacher's short sayings, the descriptions of his actions, his dialogues with his disciples. The book was created after Confucius' death, and it took 30 to 50 years to finish it. Classical literature was created by "sages", i.e., the most significant poets of various eras, and the works that belong to the classics can be called exhaustive, comprehensive, all-embracing. Original views of founders of a tradition, such as Ki-no Tsurayuki in the tradition of *tanka* and Matsuo Bashō in the tradition of *haiku*, were preserved in archetypical archaic forms, and later disciples, zealous keepers of tradition, and commentators, considered and developed only some particular aspect of the tradition. For example, the founder of the classical genre of *haiku* from the school of "True *Haiku*" (Shōfu) Matsuo Bashō (17th century) did not compose treatises. He only spoke by uttering cryptic aphorisms, which were taken up and interpreted by his disciples, who composed theoretical treatises on the basis of their teacher's words.

as sacred, while written words lost their magical power.⁴ Such treatises were usually created when a genre was born or when it reached its peak. In the 20th century, there appeared retrospective poetics set forth in several treatises on some classical genres (for example, a recreated retrospective poetic by an outstanding 20th century poet Masaoka Shiki, which transformed the traditional genres of *tanka* and *haiku* on a new basis).

Another type of literary criticism was refereeing on poetic tournaments held at the Imperial palace, where the best poets of the time served as judges, giving victory to some *waka* (*tanka*) poems. The mentions of the first poetic tournaments date back to the Nara era (710–794), while official tournaments at the Imperial court were held in the 9th century, the first of them being the “Tournament in the House of Koretaka” (860). One of the best known, precisely dated and recorded was the “Tournament of Empress Kanpyō” (898), where 190 songs were composed, but, sadly, the results have not been preserved. The most representative tournament, where the greatest poets, including Ki-no Tsurayuki, participated, was the “Tournament in the Teijiin Palace”, and, after it, the marks given by the judges and their commentaries were preserved. This contest gives text studies scholars an opportunity to understand the classical procedure of selecting the poems, the etiquette, the relations between the poets and the judges, the motivation for the marks. There were tournaments, where a song, a flower, and model landscape were presented to the judges; such mixed tournaments were gaining popularity among the aristocracy and encouraged the introduction of new forms of contests fashionable in the Heian era (794–1192) court. Large tournaments were held under the auspices of the sovereign, while lesser ones were held in the houses or estates of courtiers and provincial aristocrats under the patronage of well-known poets.

⁴ In early medieval Japan, a notion of *kotodama*, “a word’s soul”, formed. It was believed that “a word’s soul” was to be obtained in the oldest Japanese-language texts, while texts written in Chinese did not possess this quality, and newer texts lost “a word’s soul”.

One more type of literary criticism was the composition of Imperial anthologies, which were created according to Imperial rescripts for several centuries since 905, when the *Kokinwakashū* (“Collection of Old and New Songs of Japan”) was created. An editing committee of outstanding poets selected the poems from a vast number of poems existing in the era, and the committee was headed by the most respected poet of the era, who played the role of a demiurge – the creator of the anthology. Overall, throughout centuries, twenty-one Imperial anthology was created. The inclusion of a poetic text into an anthology secured its author fame in posterity. In the era of samurai wars, warriors entered the capital occupied by enemies in order to, risking their life, present their compositions to the composition committee. The selections was necessary in order to make a canonical anthology out of the mass of the poems of the era (and every aristocrat-official had to compose *waka* poems), which would become an example for the future generations of poets, an ideal. The poems that had not entered the anthologies were erased from the memory of generations and ceased to exist. The canon of poetry in the anthologies proved to be very long-lasting; from the 8th, 10th, 13th centuries, there are unbroken connections extending into the 20th–21st centuries. It is by means of such selection that poetry was turned into classics, and the ancient anonymous compilers of the *Man'yōshū* believed that “the excessive creates chaos of the world, therefore, purification and removal of excessive writings leads to the search for true poetic word” [Kokinwakashū 2001, p. 12].

Compilers and the Commentator of Anthologies on Creating Poetry

In synchronous and consecutive commentaries, classical literature was presented as a single whole, as an extending text of great significance for the state, for maintaining order and harmony. The compiler of the anthology *Kokinwakashū*, a great poet of his time Ki-no Tsurayuki, wrote: “It is poetry which, with effortless ease, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of invisible gods and spirits, smooths the relations

of men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors. [...] Times may change, joy and sorrow come and go, but the words of these poems are eternal, endless as the green will threads, unchanging as the needles of the pine, long as the trailing vines...”⁵

The Japanese poetic tradition became classics when it transformed into Imperial anthologies of state significance, which had to do with ruling the state and which maintained order and harmony in the nation. A fixed number of syllables is a sign of regular poetry. In the “Kana Preface” to the *Kokinwakashū*, poet Ki-no Tsurayuki writes that “[Ebisu] songs do not have a fixed number of syllables or the regular form of a poem”.⁶ If there is no count of syllables, there is no poetry. In *Kakyō Hyōshiki* (“A Formulary for Verse Based on the Canons of Poetry”, 772), the earliest treatise on Japanese poetry, written in *kanbun*, Fujiwara-no Hamanari speaks about the chaos of ancient words: “Thus, ancient people were pure in customs and essence, composed words, but it came out remote, small... Among the five lines, there are grave vices and sicknesses of eight types.”⁷ In Kisen’s treatise *Yamato Sakushiki* (“Rules of Composing Japanese Songs”, 10th century), the second, in terms of time, work on the topic of Japanese poetry, “good harmony” of poetry is connected to strict poetic form. According to Hamanari, ordering the chaos of ancient songs is done by Shinto *kami* gods, while Kisen names Bodhisattva Manjushri, named “beautiful voice” (Manjughosa) in the Indian tradition [Ermakova 1995, p. 159].

The main subject matter of ancient *uta-gaki* amoebaeon songs are love and nature, connected to fertility as the main focus and goal of a festivity. As *uta-gaki* poetry was born, the importance of lyrical and natural themes and motifs in the eventual poetic tradition became linked to the rituals of fertility of rice.

⁵ Translation by L. Grzanka in [Kokinshū 2004, pp. 35, 47]. For Russian translation, see [Kokinwakashū 2001, p. 43].

⁶ Translation by L. Grzanka in [Kokinshū 2004, p. 36]. For Russian translation, see [Kokinwakashū 2001, p. 380].

⁷ Rendered from the Russian version in [Yermakova 1995, p. 158].

The places where *utagaki* rituals were conducted were mountains, seashores, wilderness, river and lake banks. Sometimes they were performed in the capital, in front of the Suzakumon Gate (under Emperor Shōmu, 735? or 734?), and this ritual was described in *Shoku Nihongi* (“Continued Chronicle of Japan”, describing the reign of nine emperors, 797). 230–240 people participated in it; they were dressed in *azuchi* Eastern clothes, and songs were performed in the presence of the sovereign. But, most often, to perform *utagaki* rituals, people climbed tall mountains. Performing an *utagaki* ritual on a mountain was connected to the belief in the divine essence of tall mountains and in the mountain magic in general.

From Ancient Amoebaeon Songs to Poetic Anthologies

Ancient *utagaki* songs, performed by two semi-choruses of girls and young men, entered the first book of the classical *Manyōshū*, as they were selected by an anonymous editing committee or a single compiler (this is not known for certain even now, but Japanese scholars tend to believe that something like a committee of compilers existed). They were selected from a mass of poems that have not been preserved until now and of which, according to *Hitachi Fūdōki* (“Records of the Customs and Lands of Hitachi”, 8th century), there was “a great number”. This was the first time poems were selected for an anthology, and this was later repeated several times as each new anthology was created.

This poetry was taken from the ancient *fūdōki* records (Records of Customs and Lands, 8th century), from the preserved oral forms of *utagaki*, and it was partly included in the first Japanese poetic anthology, *Man'yōshū*. This was the first written-down act of literary criticism in the 8th century, an initial form of selection, when the criteria of literary preferences were only being formed, a form of an anthology as a single work presenting poetic landscape consisting of mountains, summits,

ravines, and gorges, as an anthology was believed to be a reflection of heaven and earth. This anthology was not yet Imperial, and it appeared from an enormous poetic mass, which had been collected by the 8th century from the oral tradition, from the collections of aristocratic houses, from peasants' poetry, poetry of Azuma warriors, from the poems of the first professional court poets.

The anonymous authors of the anthology, which defined the whole consequent history of Japanese poetry by its very selection of poems, were “abandoning the unnecessary and correcting the unordered”, i.e., followed Confucius [Honda 1975, p. 1]. The definition of Confucius as someone who “deletes undesirable parts, removes, corrects” [Chou Yū-t'ung 1983, p. 251] and his saying that he “transmits but does not create” [Chou Yū-t'ung 1983, p. 252] extended to the commentators of future generations: they removed things that did not match the ideal; by means of selection, they turned poetic texts into canon, into classics. They collected poems, and they deleted them, and they removed unnecessary ones while aiming for ordering; besides, they edited and composed anthologies.

The selection of poems that became canonic from the mass of poetry was the first method of literary criticism and a way to create canon. The editors were the creators of the classical canon of Japanese literature; their role was valued higher than that of individual poets, even great ones. It is the editor who was the demiurge and the creator of poetry “purified from excessive things”. Selection, purification, compilation, editing are the most important and supreme activity of a commentator. There appeared great poets, sages, authors of anthologies and commentators explaining the exegesis, who were deified by their successors and whose example they followed.

The roots of this phenomenon date back to ancient India, where, in the Hindu tradition, according to John B. Henderson's book *Scripture, Canon and Commentary*, Vyasa (“compiler”, “editor”) is revered as the “creator” of the great epos of Mahabharata and Brahma Sutra [Henderson 1991, p. 31]. In China, Han era (206 BC–220 AD) scholars imbued Confucius with the same role; however, there is little historical

evidence that Confucius edited and “purified” important classics of ancient China, even though he “transmitted” them as he understood this process [Henderson 1991, p. 30].

The Role of the State in Creating Canonical Anthologies

The canonization, identification, and editing of classical texts, both religious and literary ones, is often preceded by political will, a decree by either state or church authorities. Such decrees were issued by sovereigns, for example, by the Chinese Emperor Wu (Emperor Wu of Han), or Japanese emperors, for the purpose of creating anthologies. An example is the 905 decree by Emperor Daigo to create the first Imperial anthology, *Kokinshū* (“Collection of Old and New Songs of Japan”).

In China, authorities played an important role in creating the Confucian canon, and, in Japan, the canon of Japanese classical poetry. The canonization of a text, the creation of a “body of tradition”, classical literary or sacred texts aspiring for authoritativeness was preceded by the appearance of political, prophetic, or literary rescripts. Rulers played a great role in the formation of the classics: for example, the emperors of Later Han initiated gatherings of scholars so as to study and interpret the teachings of Confucius. Twenty-one Japanese Imperial anthology (*Chokusen Wakashū*, 10th to 15th centuries) were created after the respective rescripts of ruling emperors.⁸

Modern scholars perceives the first anthology, *Man'yōshū*, as a purely literary work. In the medieval times, this work produced a large number of commentaries and imitations. Together with the mythological text of *Kojiki* (“Records of Ancient Matters”, 812), *Man'yōshū* was the main object of scholarly study of the medieval time, a source of mythological

⁸ The twenty-one Imperial anthology included 33,700 poems, selected over the five-hundred-year period from an unaccounted-for number of five-line *waka* poems (*tanka*).

plots, a literary example and ideal, and inspiration for poets and writers. Everybody quoted *Man'yōshū* for centuries, nay for more than a millennium; it was an inexhaustible classical text of the tradition, a source of knowledge and wisdom.

Commenting continues even now. Besides academic commentary by renowned scholars, there are also popular “folk commentaries” by lay people, who connect the *Man'yōshū* poems to the events of their lives. Commentaries to the first classics are now perceived as an aura of the tradition. *Man'yōshū* is not merely a literary monument, but a literary canon in a single text, even if “surrounded” by various interpretations.

Types of Commentaries and the Composition of Anthologies

Speaking about commentaries in general, one must distinguish their various types: moral and philosophical, religious, historical and ethnographical, textological and literary ones (with the latter most often being clarifications of double and triple meanings of literary images and metaphors). The first two types mainly apply to scriptures, to the religious canon. So, is there a difference between the early medieval commentators, who were, essentially, compilers of annotations and glossaries, and who “did not know how to transmit the thoughts of sages” [Chou Yū-t'ung 1983, p. 1] and later ones, more educated, well-read in treatises and commentaries, poets and literary scholars? The problem was that most commentaries to classical literature only focused on the meaning of particular phrases and words, while the metaphysics was paid little attention by the commentators. Medieval commentators of various eras and schools adhered to roughly the same set of ideas and perceptions. For centuries, they suggested revisions of classical works, clarifications of word meanings, deepening of factual commentaries.

The classics, at least the poetic ones, have an anthological nature (organization), which the editors and compilers extracted from various sources: folk songs recorded in the *fūdōki* and ancient texts, songs

of fishermen and farmers, of guards in the border posts of faraway eastern provinces, poems from private anthologies and aristocratic houses, including the Imperial House, works by court poets, who were the first professional men of letters. It is hard to believe that the compilers and commentators did not think about the sources of poetic collections they created. The anthological canon was perceived by the future compilers of Imperial collections as self-sufficient and well-organized. Such an organized approach was facilitated by the existence of the medieval bureaucratic departments of the Bureau of Music and the Bureau of Rituals, and, later, the Bureau of poetry, which, at the state level, supported and represented art (music, literature) as a well-structured whole, corresponding to the ideal image of the state and its officials.

Japanese-language treatises on poetry, in particular, the two Prefaces to the medieval anthology of *Kokinwakashū*, written by two greatest poets and compilers of the 10th century, Ki-no Tsurayuki and Ki-no Yoshimochi, set forth the principles of Japanese poetics. These Prefaces had predecessors, too: the Chinese-language *Kakyō Hyōshiki* (“Formulary for Verse Based on the Canons of Poetry”, 8th century) by Fujiwara-no Hamanari and the work by monk Kisen (Kisen-*hōshi*, one of the “six immortal poets”) *Kisen Sakushiki* (“Kisen’s Rule of Composing Poems”), also written in Chinese. However, the preface by Ki-no Tsurayuki became the most important work on the theory of Japanese poetry for many centuries. A. A. Dolin writes in his foreword to the Russian translation of *Kokinwakashū*: “These words, like the Preface by Tsurayuki in its theoretical part, were an attempt to apply to Japanese poetry the rules of Chinese verse, based on various Chinese poetics.” [Dolin 2001, p. 35]

This opinion is only partly true because, by using the Chinese poetics, Tsurayuki attempted to describe his contemporary Japanese poetics, and later create his own national poetics by means of literary criticism, i.e., separating “the bad” from “the good”, proceeding from the *waka* works sharply differing from Chinese genres. Another Preface, the Chinese one, written by poet Ki-no Yoshimochi, remains somewhat in the shadow, even

though it repeats many statements of the Japanese Preface. The value of Ki-no Tsurayuki's preface is not disputed by anyone, but the Chinese Preface went to the background for centuries. Both Ki-no Tsurayuki and Ki-no Yoshimochi created a unified text, which partly repeats itself but nevertheless creates a new attitude to classical poetry by formalizing it, creating literary reflection. This is a vivid example of parallelism in literary criticism.

The accumulation of various texts clarifying the anthology (forewords, commentaries) gives weight to the collection of poems, increases its authoritativeness, gives characteristics to eras and names. Prefaces are aimed at choosing and selecting poems for the anthology. The compiler molds the anthology, as if from clay, using other poets' works as material. An anthology is not a selection of the best poems; it is a more complex system where, for example, a masterpiece is contrasted by poems of second rank, where there is interchange between poems of various levels, topics, time. An anthology was believed to be a reflection of heaven and earth, and mountain summits had to be contrasted by deep gorges.

In the Tang era (618–907), scholar Lu Deping wrote: “*Xu* is the preface, literally it means “sequence”. The same thing as *xu* meaning “order”, i.e., the preface sets the sequence of authors' directions and follows them.” [Golygina 1971, p. 34].

Prefaces to selections and anthologies embodied the idea of an ordered collection of names and texts. The author of a preface explains the principle of ordering the contents based on genre, time, topics, authors, or seasons. Another task of the author is to join the line of preceding collections, i.e., to reiterate what he was doing in relation to the anthology's authors. The author of a preface had to point at a classic, authoritative in the tradition, to which he could refer. Thus, both Ki-no Tsurayuki and Ki-no Yoshimochi appeal to the previous anthology, *Man'yōshū*.

“This is hardly an accident that the character *xuan*, “choose, select, selection, collection,” also has the meanings “enumerate”, “line up with”, “walk in line”. Generally speaking, etymologically, the terms connected to the procedure of creating anthologies can notably be divided into several

groups [...]: one includes words with “tailoring” meaning, reflecting the idea of a “body of literature”, which must, so to speak, be “clothed” – this is where *cai*, meaning “to cut out” ..., *zuan*, meaning “fabric edge, pattern”, etc. come from. Another category is composed of words conveying the idea of a collection of equal elements, like the key term of *ji*, “gathering”, which originally meant a flock of birds on a tree, or *lin*, “forest”, or the word “garden” (*yuán*), widely used to denote literary collections and in many other Eastern traditions” [Smirnov 2014, pp. 111–113].

From all these terms of Chinese origin, in Japanese poetic scholarship, the words “select”, “collect”, “make a collection” (Chinese: *xuan*, Japanese: *sen*) and “collection”, “gather together”, “gather in a flock” (originally, “birds on a tree”, Chinese: 集 *ji*, Japanese: *shū*) are used.

Editing, Deleting, and Moving Texts

Deleting undesirable passages, purifying, cutting are important instruments of creating a classical text in the Far East, according to the understanding of medieval compilers and commentators. The classics became classics when texts were moved from ancient annals, family books, records of lands and customs, things and events having to do with ritual and state affairs into the collection of canonical texts by means of selection, deletion, and editing. We have tried to show this using the example of the inclusion of ancient *utagaki* songs into the anthology of classical *waka* [Man'yōshū 1957–1962, 21]. “Excessive writing can produce chaos in the world, so he [Confucius] simplified it, so that [people of] the world [do] not try to destroy [excessive] writing and reach true essence,” wrote a Ming era (1368–1644) Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) [Wang Yang-ming 1971, p. 21].

The anonymous compilers of the poetic anthology *Man'yōshū*, court scribe and historiographer Ō-no Yasumaro, storyteller Hieda-no Are, from whose words *Kojiki* was written, the compiler of the anthology *Kokinwakashū* Ki-no Tsurayuki – all of them selected material

necessary to create classical texts, be it myths, legends, historical facts, or poetry. In his Preface to *Kokinshū*, Ki-no Tsurayuki also serves as a commentator of the works of his contemporary great poets, whose poems he selected for the anthology.

The genres and their history, poets, styles, directions, and artistic features were established by the authority of anthologies over centuries, since the 8th century. Collections of poems concluded eras and opened new horizons in the history of literature, they demonstrated creative endeavors of generations of poets and, often repeating the works of previous anthologies, established direct connection between the centuries of the existence of classical poetry. Prefaces and afterwords to anthologies provided a starting point, showed changes in poetics, the fluidity of literary tastes of various eras. Anthologies were seen by commentators and readers as encyclopedias of traditional life; one could learn a lot of facts from them; they were sources of knowledge, along with being sources of models of literary taste.

Japanese poetry has divine origins, the first songs were composed by gods. A man's role is to follow the examples and to mimic nature; about a nightingale and a frog it is said because it is pre-human poetry, and human poetry only appears with the dialogue of demiurge gods Izanami and Izanagi, with the *waka* by god Susanoo-no Mikoto in the 8th century collection of Shinto myths and historical records *Kojiki*. Ki-no Tsurayuki calls “the marriage songs of the female god and the male god sung beneath the floating bridge of heaven” [*Kokinshū* 2004, p. 36].⁹, i.e., the abovementioned songs of Izanagi and Izanami, the first song. There are also references to other sources of the “first songs”.

This reference to gods as the first authors of Japanese songs gave the anthologies additional aspect of a “holy scripture”. In medieval Europe, there was a notion of “being possessed by a book”, and one can compare to this the attitude to the classical anthologies of Japanese poetry. Even copying these collections was considered to be a “pious deed”. The practice of copying classics by hand came from the custom of copying Buddhist

⁹ For Russian translation, see [*Kokinwakashū* 2001, p. 43].

sutras, and it facilitated the preservation of the traditional texts over the centuries. In Japan, texts copied by the hand of a great medieval poet Fujiwara-no Teika (1162–1241) (*Teika hitsu bon*, “scrolls belonging to Teika’s brush”) were the most highly valued ones, and Japanese scholars believe them to be most accurate.

Commentators created common space for separate works of the canon, found connections between them and with the intellectual history of the period. Even those medieval thinkers who rejected the existing commentary traditions, creating their own instead, continued to operate within the intellectual world created by the canonical literary exegesis. The texts considered to be commentaries by the tradition could vary significantly: there were merely glosses, which explained difficult passages in the text, or geographical and people’s names, political figures, and events mentioned in the classical text.

The inclusion of commentaries in the classical text is a situation typical for medieval Japanese texts. A text was unthinkable without commentaries. And even in modern editions of the classics, a page of a canonical text consists of three parts, where the upper one contains general information about the text, the middle one is the classical text itself, and the lower one includes factual, linguistic, and other commentaries of more detailed nature, focusing on particular phrases, words, images. There are modern interpretations of what can be called commentaries, and these broad definitions include practically everything: writing, reading, context, codes, laws, etc.

Nowadays, scholars place the first commentaries in the ancient times, when the classics did not exist yet and when it was necessary to guess the meaning of words of oracles, to untangle and understand signs on divination turtle shells and deer bones, to interpret prophetic dreams. The earlier exegesis of classical texts dates back to the pre-writing times, asserts Roberto K. Ong, to interpretations of dreams, heavenly omens, etc. [Ong 1988, p. 48]. Henderson writes that, according to medieval commentators’ understanding, classical works (first anthologies, collections of myths) were created by “sages”, and commentaries were created by the “worthy ones”, i.e., those who had “secondary” knowledge

and understanding of the truth, who could interpret the canon as they understood it to be interpreted by the first priests [Henderson 1991, p. 234].

Such hierarchy between classical texts and commentaries was preserved for centuries: the key text of a religious tradition was revealed to the people by gods, and then commentators – saints and prophets, explained and developed it. The same applied to traditional literary texts. Anthologies were composed by renowned poets, and then scholars wrote commentaries on them, expanding knowledge about them and explaining them. Wang Yang-ming wrote that “through texts, we understand the general, through commentaries – the particular.”

Textual Problems in Commentaries

Commentaries are mostly limited to lexical issues, and the focus is placed on explaining unclear or difficult to understand words and phrases. Their goal was to solve difficult textual problems that cause questions, to explain what the compilers and authors of the anthologies wanted to say. They explained the grammar, the etymology of words, found quotes from Japanese literature and references to classical Chinese texts, provided historical evidence. This was important not because the words of early compilers were unclear or incomplete, or excessively metaphoric, but rather because of such historical conditions as lexical and grammatical changes in the language, the loss, for various reasons, of parts of texts, which had to be explained, fragmentation of the text, the change of the form of written symbols (*kanji*), as well as more global changes in the culture.¹⁰

¹⁰ A vivid example of an obscure metaphorical text are the saying of a great Japanese poet, Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694). For example, about *haiku* poems, he said: “*Haiku* is wrought gold,” about creativity: “Raise your heart and return to the lowly.” These metaphorical and not always clear words were interpreted and explained by his disciples, who unfolded his words into treatises on poetry. Bashō himself wrote poetry and prose, served as judge at many *haiku* tournaments, but he did not write treatises on poetry,

The understanding that such changes happen historically is the most appropriate motive to create such conventional commentaries in every subsequent time period. Such commentaries appear almost immediately after a work is created, and as historical, cultural, and linguistic changes, which separate and distance us from the classics, pile up, they become even more necessary. Even an unsophisticated “explainer” of a text has in mind a general picture of the anthology or some other text, which is important in the tradition, or the general context of the culture. So-called sub-commentaries, which explain initial commentaries to the text, appear in key turning point eras, when the canon requires revision. Ultimately, commentaries turn from explanations of a classical text into, in a sense, an encyclopedia of knowledge about the text, and they become inseparable from it. According to this understanding, the classical text was complete, comprehensive, and exhaustive, and, therefore, the explanations were a collection of the most extensive knowledge about this text.

Literary tradition used the language of aphoristic and metaphorical sayings. Judgements and aphorisms by teachers in all fields of art and literature are deliberately fragmentary and metaphorical, often obscure and incomprehensible; they almost always relied on spoken word. Their words require special interpretation, which was done by disciples, who deciphered the words of sages in the vein of their school’s philosophy. These were the disciples who wrote down the fleeting words of teachers.

One should not believe that the initial factual and linguistic commentary deals only with particular difficulties in the text. The words and phrases requiring explanations were, for the commentators, a starting point around which they organized their knowledge. In the commentary tradition, classical texts were and are considered full, exhaustive, comprehensive, so all knowledge of them is best concentrated not outside the canon, but inside it – as commentaries. The number of commentaries to the anthologies *Man’yōshū*, *Kokinwakashū*, and *Shin*

and he never explained his words or his judgements – this was done by his disciples belonging to Bashō’s school – Tachibana Hokushi, Mukai Kyorai, Hattori Dohō, Kagami Shikō.

Kokinwakashū (“New Collection of Old and New Songs of Japan”, 13th century) considerably exceeds the volume of classical texts themselves. It became a tendency to unfold commentaries into sizeable independent philological and historical studies of discrete character.

Commentaries of the (tentatively speaking) modern period became not only compendia of knowledge in all fields, but also a field to cultivate various sciences. Astronomy, phonetics, geography, grammar, etymology, medicine, and many other sciences were necessary to create correct explanatory commentaries. Besides, commentators had to deeply understand such areas of medieval knowledge as astrology, exorcist medicine, alchemy, various forms of divination (for example, using celestial omens). Commentaries developed from simple explanations into collections of various knowledge in all spheres of life, science, literature, and influenced the internal world and the knowledge of a medieval Japanese. Commentaries were one of the most important medieval forms of expressing and generalizing specialized scientific and pre-scientific knowledge (alchemy, medicine).

The genre of commentaries played its role in specializing knowledge by fields. It dominated other areas not only as a genre important for developing knowledge, but also as a form of intellectual activity focusing on the canonical text. Commentators referred to all significant literary texts of their time and “processed” them.

The necessity for commentaries was also reflected in the medieval presentation of classical texts in the form of anthologies, collections, and epitomes. Therefore, it is not surprising that most significant poets, essayists, and writers of the medieval period composed anthologies, arranged authoritative texts, paid a lot of effort to collect and concentrate canonical texts. In addition to vast and artistic poetic editions, such as *Man'yōshū*, *Kokinwakashū*, and *Shin Kokinwakashū*, smaller collections incorporating poems from several centuries, composed by famous poets and representing some elaborate compositional idea, were also popular. There were many such collections, but the most recognized one is *Hyakunin Isshu* (“One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets”, 13th century).

Compilers and commentators of medieval literary texts were raised to the level of poets, and commentaries were included in the canon. The canon itself was connected to compiling, editing, and commenting on texts. Who are the creators or *Kojiki*, *Man'yōshū*, *Kokinwakashū*, and other key texts of the ancient and medieval times – are they famous poets, founders of traditions, or anonymous collectors, editors, compilers, and, later, commentators and critics? These are the creators of the canon who make it authoritative.

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