

## METAMORPHOSES

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REVIEW: STEPHEN D. MILLER WITH PATRICK DONNELLY, *THE WIND FROM VULTURE PEAK: THE BUDDHIFICATION OF JAPANESE WAKA IN THE HEIAN PERIOD*. ITHACA, NY: CORNELL EAST ASIA PROGRAM, 2013.

By the second quarter of the sixth century, Buddhist texts and teachings had entered the Japanese archipelago, where they soon became the object of widespread study and veneration. Yet it would be another five hundred years before Buddhism began to figure as a notable concern of *waka* (Japanese language poetry) and even longer before Buddhist themed *waka* came to form a distinct category in the court-sponsored anthologies that appeared in succession from the start of the tenth century. While this lengthy interval may prompt us to wonder “What took so long?”, we should also bear in mind that the foreign provenance of Buddhist thought surely complicated its ready incorporation into the native poetic tradition, which located its very origins in the worship of domestic deities. Moreover, a perceived suspicion of secular poetic composition within Buddhist doctrine itself was another likely hindrance to the fusion of these literary and religious practices. In *The Wind From Vulture Peak: the Buddhification of Japanese Waka in the Heian Period*, Stephen Miller offers a detailed and insightful account of the process by which these and other obstacles were surmounted and Buddhist themes came to be conceived of as a legitimate and important domain of Japanese poetic expression.

The volume features beautiful English renditions of more than one hundred Buddhist poems drawn from the court-sponsored anthologies of the eleventh to twelfth centuries along with a few earlier works: translations that are the fruit of Miller’s collaboration with the poet Patrick Donnelly. Alongside these translations (for which Romanized Japanese texts have been furnished), Miller offers in the volume an exhaustive discussion of the history of modern scholarship on the conceptualization of Buddhist poetry in Japan, his literary analysis of the individual poems, as well as his elucidation of the intricate structural principles shaping the organization of poetic sequences in the anthologies. The result is a volume that will satisfy a scholarly audience (for whom this particular area of poetic activity and the related literary historiography may well be comparatively unfamiliar) but that also can be appreciated by a general readership interested principally in the poems themselves.

The titular Vulture Peak is the name of the site in India where the historical Buddha is said to have preached the Lotus Sutra, and Miller’s

study takes its name from the following poem by Bishop Jōen:

*fukikaesu / washi no yamakaze / nakariseba / koromo no ura no / tama o mimashi  
ya*

if the wind  
           from Vulture Peak  
 had not blown  
           my sleeves inside-out—  
 would I have found  
                   the jewel  
 inside the reverse  
           of my coat? (254)

As Miller explains, the poem calls upon images that are longstanding fixtures of courtly poetry (wind, sleeves, jewel, and coat), but deploys them with a distinctly Buddhist gloss through the poem’s reference to the Indian site and its invocation of the parable of “a poor man who has lived, unbeknownst to him, with a jewel that was sewn into the seam of his coat while he was intoxicated” (262). The “wind from Vulture Peak” is thus a metaphor for the Buddha’s teachings, which enabled the man to awaken to his own spiritual richness. Some readers may resist the apparent didacticism of this and other poems in the volume, but Miller’s introduction reminds us that “Japanese readers did not view *waka* that displayed a tendency to guide or instruct with disdain” (12) and usefully directs our attention to how the didactic impulse can be understood as symptomatic of a “meditative mode” that appeals more to the intellect than the emotions (while not foreclosing the latter).

The somewhat elliptical quality of the above English poem demonstrates the basic approach to translation that Miller and Donnelly have adopted in the volume. Rather than directly incorporating explanatory material into their renditions of the poems, they stick closely to the poetic text itself, providing explication of allusions and references in the surrounding analytic passages. On a few rare occasions, they do include a clarifying phrase or two in their translation of a poem, but they are careful to note such additions; what’s more, they make a point of drawing the supplementary wording directly from the sutra about which the poem is written (such as in the examples on pp. 94 and 202).

Another poem that draws upon the same parable of the jewel in the seam illustrates the delightful linguistic artistry of Miller and Donnelly:

*sakigataki / minori no hana ni / oku tsuyu ya / yagate koromo no / tama to naruran*  
 dew that seeded

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the lotus of the Law  
(that rare bloom)  
must in a twinkling  
have become  
a jewel in the seam (200)

In this poem, the phrase “in a twinkling” is a particularly effective rendering of *yagate* (immediately), for while *yagate* itself does not carry any such polysemic wordplay, the sparkling imagery of the English idiom helps to draw out the *engo* (associative language) that links such words as *tsuyu* (dew) and *tama* (jewel) in the original. Conversely, what we might call an English *engo* linking “seed,” “lotus,” and “bloom” complements the original’s wordplay on *minori* (which indicates both “the Law” and “seed/fruit”). As this example suggests, the translators are adept at finding ways to reflect in English the complex linguistic artistry of the original text. In writing “the sorry world / utterly weary / I cut / away in an instant” (p. 255), for example, the translators cleverly reflect the polysemy of *kori*, which can mean both “to cut (wood)” and “to achieve spiritual resolve.”

The translators sometimes venture boldly outside the box, offering “west east south north” (p. 240) as a translation for *yomo* (lit. “in the four directions”), for example, or “there, here, everywhere” (p. 234) as a translation for *izukumo* (lit. “in all places”). In both of these cases, the result is fresh and euphonic in English while nevertheless clearly supported by the original Japanese phrasing.

The book’s central narrative is the emergence of a distinct conceptual category of Buddhist waka poetry in the court-sponsored anthologies. As Miller shows, however, this process did not track a smooth and steady teleological vector but instead proceeded along a somewhat jagged path of fits and starts. While the third court-sponsored anthology, the *Shūishū*, completed in the early eleventh century, included several poems on Buddhist themes, they were not so designated and simply appeared unlabeled in a book of “laments.” Indeed, the absence of a specific subheading has given scholars the room to disagree about where exactly the Buddhist poems start and stop in this collection. The first appearance of a categorical designation for Buddhist-themed poetry came with the fourth court-sponsored anthology, the 1086 *Goshūishū*, which gathered nineteen such poems under the heading *shakkyō* (lit., teachings of Shakyamuni) within one of the “miscellaneous” books. The subsequent fifth and sixth anthologies, the *Kin’yōshū* and the *Shikashū*, also each included several poems on Buddhist themes, but neither of these anthologies (both of which are only half the length

of the other court-sponsored anthologies) gathered them together under a separate sub-categorical designation. Miller argues that these various editorial approaches indicate lingering tensions and ambivalence surrounding the place of Buddhist themes in the court poetry tradition and demonstrate that the category remained somewhat inchoate and unstable for much of the twelfth century.

All of that changed with “a momentous event” (70) that took place in 1188: the appearance of an entire book devoted to poems on Buddhist themes, or *shakkyōka* (lit., Japanese poems on the teachings of Shakyamuni), in the seventh of these anthologies, the *Senzaishū*, compiled by Fujiwara no Shunzei. Shunzei’s creation of a book dedicated to Buddhist poetry indicated that the court-sponsored anthology project had “adopted Buddhism as one of its topics to represent the imperial world” and moreover signaled “a change in how the composition of waka was understood” (71): namely, an affirmation of the belief that the composition of *waka* might have a role to play in Buddhist practice. The categorical innovation that Shunzei introduced would be maintained in all of the court-sponsored anthologies produced in subsequent centuries.

Yet Miller’s presentation also shows that this late twelfth century shift is best understood as the “culmination of a synthesis” (1) with much earlier roots. Long before the appearance of an explicit sub-categorical designation (as in the *Goshūishū*) or a separate book (as in the *Senzaishū*), Japanese individuals had addressed Buddhist matters in a variety of different poetic contexts. For example, the several anthologies of Sinitic poems (works written by Japanese in literary Sinitic) that were compiled in eighth and ninth century Japan all include works composed by Buddhist priests, and several of these concern Buddhist topics or make conspicuous use of Buddhist vocabulary. Two of the court-sponsored Sinitic poetry anthologies, the *Bunka shūreishū* and the *Keikokushū*, even include the categorical designation *bonmon* (lit. the gate of Sanskrit).

For works composed in the Japanese language, as well, the more than four thousand poems compiled in the eighth-century *Man’yōshū* include more than fifty that have some link to Buddhism. These range from poems that satirize the Buddhist clergy, to poems composed in connection with Buddhist events, to poems attributed to Buddhist priests such as the following by the novice Mansei:

*yo no naka o / nani ni tatoemu / asabiraki / kogūnishi fume no / ato naki gotoshi*  
 to what shall I liken  
 this world?

A boat

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rows out in the morning  
leaving no trace (58)

The theme of impermanence is certainly central to this poem, but while Miller concedes the likely influence of Buddhist thought upon it, he also reasonably observes that sensitivity to evanescence was not an exclusively Buddhist concern. For these poems prior to the advent of the generic designation *shakkyō(ka)* Miller uses the term “Buddhistic.” He thereby marks a contrast with the explicitly “Buddhist” poems that would emerge in later centuries, which appear in extended sequences, show a deeper connection with Buddhist scriptures, and embody more Buddhist sentiment. Miller describes the earlier Buddhistic waka as reflecting a more superficial engagement: “not so much an interaction with, but a reaction to, aspects of Buddhist culture” (51).

If Shunzei’s late twelfth century provision of an entire book devoted to Buddhist poems marks his recognition of the enlightening power of *waka* and the incorporation of Buddhist themes within the court-sponsored anthology project, this was a change anticipated by private anthologies compiled in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In particular, the 1012 *Hosshin wakashū* of Princess Senshi (964–1035) marks an important articulation of the idea that *waka* composition could be a means to enlightenment: “a belief that had never before found expression in Japan” (38). Miller’s account allows us to understand how a re-conceptualization of the practice of writing waka enabled realms of poetic expression that had thus far been explored in Sinitic genres and in private anthologies to be incorporated within the court-sponsored anthologies.

*The Wind From Vulture Peak* is carefully edited with only a handful of trivial typographical errors. The only two I noticed that might cause some momentary confusion are on p. 105 (where Miller refers to a poem as no. 1336 when he means no. 1335) and p. 117 (where “Masamune no musume” is Romanized as “Masamune no onna”; though this name is corrected when it appears again on p. 121). Throughout, Miller’s writing style is clear and precise; the volume is also well-structured and includes a useful appendix and additional reference matter. As I hope readers can appreciate from the poems I have quoted in this review, the translations are consistently superb (though I confess that “ripples off the shingle” on p. 99 left me briefly puzzled until my English dictionary revealed that “shingle” can also mean a pebbled beach—who knew?).

In discussing their approach to transforming these works into English, the authors state that they hoped “to convey in our translations

the emotional and spiritual arguments of these poems in accurate versions that are also excellent poems in idiomatic, musical, contemporary English” (46). Miller and Donnelly have succeeded marvelously in their aim, as their receipt of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature in 2015 amply demonstrates.