

# Man'yōshū: a reflection of Japan's history essay sample

Literature



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Japan not only has a rich culture, it also has a wealthy literature. The Japanese literature, unlike other countries' literature, has started early. This early development of the written arts is very much evident in the ancient anthology, *Man'yōshū*, which means *Collection of 10, 000 Leaves* (Cohn, 2006) . The said anthology, which is considered the oldest in Japan dates way back between 600 and 700 AD (Microsoft Encarta 2007). It is made up of many poems which speak of the grandeur of ancient Japan with its imperial family and royal courts. The poems are composed by a variety of authors. Much of them are from the imperial family if not from the couriers who serve the imperial family.

#### Author

One of the major authors that are featured in the *Man'yōshū* is Kakinomoto no Hitomaro. Looking throughout the ancient poem collection, it is also not difficult to conclude that he is the most renowned of all the poets. Hitomaro was believed to be a courtier for the royal family (Microsoft Encarta 2007). Nevertheless, there is no concrete information as to who he really is or where he came from. What is evident of Hitomaro's character are also drawn from the *Man'yōshū*. Although the *Man'yōshū* reveals much of the history of Japan, it is insufficient as basis for Hitomaro's personal background. Nevertheless, Hitomaro attended upon three rulers of ancient Japan, namely, Temmu, Jito and Mommu (Microsoft Encarta 2007). He came from the clan Asomi which is not actually a very prominent or powerful clan. Nevertheless, it has remote connection to the reigning family of Japan (Cranston, 1993, p. 86). This moderate prominence can be one of the reasons of his popularity and elegant talent in poetry.

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## Era and Approximate Date

Although much of the Man'yōshū has been written in the earlier years, it is claimed that it is compiled into an anthology in the Nara period (Cohn, 2006). Its opening poem is that of Hitomaro and thus, gives him the additional prominence in Japanese literature making him the greatest and first credited poet of Japan. The period of which he proposed his introductory poem in the Man'yōshū was a time of transition for Japan. It was a shift between the ancient traditions to a new more modern culture where the power and prominence of the imperial family begins to decline (Yakushigawa, 2008). Analyzing the era onto which the Man'yōshū was born and the introductory poem of Hitomaro, one will realize that his poem is not only an introduction to the collection but also an introduction to the era that is to come. Such is also evident in the subject of the poem which speaks of the end of a former reigning capital.

## Likely Audience

The introductory poem of the Man'yōshū written by Hitomaro speaks of the fall of a former capital, Omi. In the poem, the lines seem to form the image of a broken and wasted city. It is therefore obvious that the audience of the poem is not the inhabitants of the lost city. In the history of Japan, the fall of a former capital and its ruin also means the building of a new capital in a different city (Yakushigawa, 2008). Thus, the ruin of Omi actually signifies the rise of a new capital which is in Nara. Thus, to the people of Nara who are celebrating the rise of a new rule, the introductory poem is dedicated

and written. It is in the description of the ruined capital that the grandeur of the new capital is ironically described.

## Genre

The poem's genre is that of the collective subjects that exhibit the grandeur of the imperial family. It is known that courtiers like Hitomaro were maintained by the ruling family to compose poetry concerning the reign of their family. It is considered that the ruling family wishes to immortalize their splendor through the use of such poets. The introductory poem of the Man'yōshū by Hitomaro is one such poem. It is a poem that though narrating a part of history, gives an impression of the magnificence of the age of Nara.

## Plot, Theme and Subject Matter

The introductory poem of the Man'yōshū by Hitomaro is presumably the most famous of all the poems in the anthology. It speaks of the ruined capital Omi. It speaks of the past magnificence of the capital which was at the time the poem is written has already become a wasteland. The poet related the transition of the rule to another family which is evident by lines that speak of the passing on of the power. This is evident in the lines where he tries to convey that the earlier ruler now passes the scepter of glory to another in Sasanami (Cranston, 1993, p. 89). Hitomaro expresses his grief and puzzlement of the things that have taken place and yet, he praises the new era to come. Thus, he somehow shares the sadness with that of the ruined city. This is characteristic of Hitomaro who is known for his sense of humanity and empathy with nature itself (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004).

## Structure and Organization

Hitomaro's introductory poem has a structure similar to a chōka-hanka (Cranston, 1993, p. 88). In ancient Japanese poetry, certain forms called the chōka, tanka, and hanka exist. The structure of each varies and is very prominent in the Man'yōshū. The tanka has five lines with a syllable pattern 5-7-5-7-7, resulting in 31 syllables, while a chōka is a long poem with a variable number of alternating 5- and 7-syllable lines and a final 7-syllable line. When the tanka is combined with a chōka in a single poem, it is then called a hanka (Cohn, 2006). The introductory poem by Hitomaro has this very structure: a long poem or chōka begins it and ends with two tankas called envoys (Cranston, 1993, p. 89). The poem's organization is that of a narration of the fall of the capital Ōmi, followed by the reign of the subsequent capital and then concluded with the grief and wonder of the whole event that commenced. The two envoys are very appropriately located and thus conclude the poem in a very elegant way.

## Comments and Insights

The poem is a wonderful depiction of that brief part of Japanese history. It is a very elegant way of narrating history with the decorative power of poetry. Although the poem is relatively short and is very specific to an era, it is apparent that the lifestyles and whereabouts of the imperial family were described. It gives us a hint of how the ruling families lived in that era. It also gives us an image of how the society and civilization of ancient Japan worked. Furthermore, it is very interesting to note that the emperors themselves have appreciated the honor and praise that poetry can attribute

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to themselves that they even employed courtiers like Hitomaro whose only duty is to compose poetry for their legacy. The very efforts of assembling the Man'yōshū also give us an idea that poetry has already been respected and admired in ancient Japan. Although the poem is about the fall of a capital, it has been selected as the introductory poem of a large collection of poems. The readers then must have thought of such irony and deliberate choice. But then, if one pierces deeper into the meaning of the poem, the clever use of such irony is revealed making its place more than fitting for its purpose. The introductory poem of the Man'yōshū by Hitomaro is really one of the many treasures of the Japanese literature that should be preserved through time.

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