Wang Zhaojun’s New Portrait:
Photography in Nineteenth Century Kanshibun

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In 1874, just six years after the Restoration had made Tokyo the center of a new regime, a poet named Kikuchi Sankei (1819-1891) published a volume of verse that sought to depict the spectacular changes in material culture, architecture, and daily life visible in the new capital. Inspired by the recently introduced technology of photography, Sankei called his work Tokkei shashinkō or “Tokyo Camera.” Each of the constituent poems of this completely un-illustrated text was presented as though it were a photograph; Sankei explained that although he would be using ink rather than chemicals, and writing on paper rather than glass, he would still be endeavoring to capture several striking scenes and eye-catching elements of the urban spectacle. The series of poetic snapshots appeared with a prodigious number of prefixes contributed by Sankei’s literary conferees, including one by Narushima Ryūhoku (1837-1884), who wrote:

Poetry may be dismissed as nothing more than a minor art, and yet among all the nations arrayed around the globe, there has never been one that lacks poetry. The nations of Europe and America that are said to be civilized... are all accustomed to respecting poetry... Recently, various gentlemen from our country have devoted themselves to mastering Western studies; they have conducted research in the natural sciences, and they have scrutinized Western laws. They have overlooked no domain of study, except for one: poetry, which nine out of ten of them reject as something useless. I find this quite puzzling, for the poetry of our country is rather like the poetry of the West — aside from the differences in orthography of course.¹

Surely Ryūhoku is exaggerating when he claims that there is little to distinguish Japanese poetry from Western poetry beyond mere orthography, but what deserves attention here is the way in which he frames literary practice as a discipline unjustly neglected in Japan’s rush to modernize. When Tokkei shashinkō was published in the early 1870s, the fledgling Meiji

¹ Ryūhoku’s preface, dated September 1873, is the innermost (and chronologically the earliest) of the three prefixes appearing in the unexpurgated front matter of the 1874 text; it has also been reprinted in Ryūhoku zenshu (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1897), p. 293. This and all other translations are my own unless noted.
This essay by Ochiai is but a single instance among many similar statements by pioneering kokubungaku scholars of the period, for whom this kind of “linguistic nationalism” constituted the new discipline’s ideological pillar. The idea that kanshi and kambun were incompatible with “the thoughts of the nation’s people” retroactively cast the long tradition of kanshibun by Japanese authors in a suspect light, tainting them as somehow inauthentic. Shifts in the curriculum of the new national school system, as well as institutional realignments in higher education, would further erode the place of kanshibun, producing new generations of readers that came to regard what had always been an integral part of Japanese literary activity as something antiquated, affected, artificial, and abstruse.

Yet such a dismissive view of kanshibun is difficult to reconcile with the unprecedented proliferation of Chinese poetry societies during the first two decades of Meiji: a flourishing that encompassed not only major urban centers but rural areas as well. In addition to more widespread access to education, including many academies that continued to stress proficiency in classical Chinese, the early Meiji period saw the establishment of modern newspapers, some of which introduced columns devoted to kanshi, the founding of numerous literary journals featuring kanshibun, as well as a more extensive and efficient postal system by which these materials could be readily transmitted. This combination of factors greatly expanded the audience for kanshibun texts. That the readership was significant is clear enough from the popular success of several works, but just as important to note is the enlargement of the community of kanshibun writers. Without a substantial population of consumers aspiring to write classical Chinese poetry, surely no publisher would have reprinted the one-hundred-fascicle Pei wen yun fu, the famous early eighteenth-century dictionary of classical Chinese poetic diction and rhyme that appeared in a newly accessible version in Japan in the early 1880s.

It had long been the case that a wide range of topics not conventionally treated in Japanese poetic forms such as the waka, were routinely addressed in kanshi. One of the arenas wherein kanshi most clearly dominated poetic expression in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, was the depiction of overseas travel. While waka collections based on journeys abroad were by no means unknown, many of the earliest Japanese traveling overseas at the time kept some sort of diary or travelogue that incorporated kanshi. Perhaps the earliest instance of such a work was Kōbei tsuzuki (Miscellaneous poems composed on a journey to America), by Morita Kiyoyuki (1812-1861), an attendant on the Man’en embassy of 1860. Published immediately upon the embassy’s return, Morita’s collection includes dozens of kanshi that record his impressions of various exotic sights — on board his ship, in the numerous colonial ports it called at, and in the various American cities the embassy toured both before and after its official reception in Washington. Of particular interest is the poem Morita wrote about Harriet Lane (1830-1903), the young woman then serving as something of a “First Lady pro tem” for her uncle James Buchanan, the only U.S. President not to marry.

As can be seen in many of the poems in this collection, Morita focused much of his attention on the distinctive ethnic features of the non-Japanese people he encountered abroad. At the same time, however, the descriptors that specify Ms. Lane’s ethnicity and the idiosyncrasies of her dress coexist with somewhat conventional evocations of female beauty in Chinese poetry; even Ms. Lane’s “snow [white] skin” (雪肌), for example, echoes the description of Yang Guifei in Bo Ju-yi’s “Song of Lasting Pain.” Similarly, the comment about Ms. Lane not needing to wear makeup recalls the description of Yang Guifei’s sister Lady Guoguo, who was said to be so naturally beautiful that she did not put on makeup even when appearing before the Emperor. Thus, we might say that Morita superimposes the figure of Harriet Lane onto these classical figures of Chinese beauties while taking care not to let her particularities vanish from view entirely.

A similar hybridity frames the poem as a whole, which, as the interlinear note that follows it explains, is actually not about Harriet Lane per se, but rather her reproduced image. In specifying that the poem was “composed on a photograph of President Buchanan’s first niece” (總大統嫡女初姪女写真), Morita drew an analogy between his work and the genre of taisuzuki (1. daiugashi 親畫詩), or poems composed on paintings. In Japanese kanshi practice these poems typically comprised or were imagined to accompany a well-known pictorial representation of a scene often drawn from Chinese or Japanese literature, and the poem’s title would usually be 聖女 (e ni daisu 聖女に題す); here instead of 聖女, we find shashin 写真. The word shashin (C. xiezhen) was an established term in both Chinese and Japanese meaning a realistic portrait, but in the mid-nineteenth century, it came to be used in the sense of “photograph.” On the one hand the title Morita chose reflects the freshness of his encounter with the novel and somewhat unfamiliar representational medium, while at the same time assimilating the work into a longstanding tradition of similar sorts of poems composed upon images.

Morita was by no means the only early Japanese travelogue author to fix his attention upon photography. The new technology figures prominently in the diaries and travelogues composed by many of the Japanese dispatched abroad on the shogunal missions of the 1860s. In reading Biyō ho maruyoku, the travelogues Ichikawa Sciyō wrote about his trip to Europe in 1862, for example, one comes across references every few days to the mission members being

1 Haruo Shirane explains the eventual outcome of this idea that the national language was the embodiment of the “national essence” (kokutai): “This notion of a national language, which was strengthened by the importation of Western teleocentric notions and the genbun-ichi (union of spoken and written languages) movement, was contrasted with kambun, a written language associated with China, a country that was in decline and that would succumb to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War. The result was a dramatic pedagogical shift away from the Confucian classics and the devolution of Japanese writing in kambun, which had been the language of religion, government, and scholarship.” Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki, Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 13-14.

2 Morita Kiyoyuki, Kōbei tsuzuki [s.1]. Kōetsu zōsan,1861, p. 7a
photographed, exchanging photographs with local people, purchasing photographs of famous sites and personages, and going to view photographic panoramas in European capital cities.

Of course, kanshi that incorporated new topics such as photographs were hardly limited to encounters taking place abroad. With the host of changes ushered in by the Meiji Restoration, kanshi were again employed to depict, respond to, and comment upon new material culture, making Japanese texts in Chinese from the period an especially rich resource for gaining insight into the artifacts of the time and popular attitudes toward them. A number of formal features of classical Chinese poetry, such as its larger vocabulary, its greater conciseness, its relative lack of rigid length restrictions, and its more multifarious store of poetic subjects made composition in Chinese especially accommodating for these ends. Moreover, the particularities of Japanese kanshi practice offered an additional layer of enjoyment, for any given composition could be appreciated on multiple linguistic levels.

It could be read as classical Chinese, of course, or it could be read in the hybrid form of Sino-Japanese, and some early Meiji kanshi poets even further extended these possibilities by experimenting with alternative orthographic practices. In 1870, for example, Osaka poet Tanaka Kajō (1825-1880) published Nihon fukkōshi (Poems of Japan’s restoration), a varied collection of kanshi that contains many short poems on Osaka city life, as well as a sequence of poems on local scenes from the Kawaguchi foreign quarter. The fifteen poems in this latter sequence trade mainly on the whimsical incorporation of new lexical items, an effect only amplified by Kajō’s somewhat jarring addition of furigana glosses derived mainly from English: pooruku “pork” for choran 猪欄, for example, or hirido biju “hashed beef” for gōyān 牛驄. At times, Kajō’s efforts themselves seem a bit kajō, as in the case of the word bakushi 酉詰, for which he offered both biru and ōru as glosses. In any case, amid the exuberant exota of the series appears the following poem about a pair of lovers forced into anguished separation: a familiar trope to be sure, but one that appears here with a twist:

浪速偷渡蒸気飛 From Naniwa to London, the steam flies;
別来未滿一何惜 After they parted, how rare a letter!
幽郎泣對寫真職 While she yearns for him, tearfully facing the photograph;
情姿恨無傳消息 She pities herself, lamenting that she doesn’t have a telegraph. 5

Kajō’s somewhat light poem in fact shows just how deeply new media technologies had penetrated daily life, changing the way that people viewed, remembered, and communicated even on the most intimate levels.

Around the same time, a few other poets were making the technology itself the focus of their scrutiny, further exploring the possibilities and implications of photographic representation. Perhaps the earliest such example is a poem in Kankai shōshi, a collection of about one hundred

6 Sugi Chōka , Kankai shōshi. [s.l.]: [s.n.], 1904. pp. 13b-14a

7 Given the countless retellings and reworkings of the event over the centuries in both China and Japan, it is misleading to speak of a single story of Wang Zhaojun. In the most familiar version, which began to proliferate a century or so after Wang Zhaojun’s death and is the specific referent of Chōka’s poem, the story begins when Emperor Yuan commissions individual portraits of the women in his vast seraglio; hoping to insure a flattering portrait, virtually all of the women bribe the portrait artists, except for one: Wang Zhaojun. Having refused to pay the bribe to the artist Mao Yanzhou 毛延壽, the beautiful Wang Zhaojun is painted as though she is especially ugly, making her first on the list when the Emperor uses the portraits to select the woman who is to be wed to the Xiongnu leader. When her departure comes and the Emperor realizes his mistake, it is already too late. For two thorough discussions of the Wang Zhaojun legends, see Eiyou and Dushu (Chapter 3).

work *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* makes clear, the Victorian faith in photography as "a perfect marriage between science and art: a mechanical means of allowing nature to copy herself with total accuracy and intricate exactitude" was pervasive—prompting its widespread application to the exploration and survey of peoples and landscapes both abroad and at home.

Yet while the greater potential for detail, accuracy, and objectivity that photographs provided was recognized by many Japanese *kanshi* poets of the mid-nineteenth century, their understandings were not so univocal or simplistic. If we return to Ryūhoku's poem for a moment, we see an awareness that photographs cannot be so easily correlated to external reality.

The opening couplets of the poem all suggest ways in which the photograph permits things that are impossible in reality as it is conventionally understood and experienced. He begins with an allusion to the story of the ancient Chinese emperor Wu of the Han, who burned a magic incense to conjure back the visage of his beloved after she died:

返魂難道有仙丹 Who says that "returning soul" incense has special power?

巧算其真小鏡團 Artfully, this round mirror records the truth.

Who needs the Emperor’s magic incense, the poet asks, when one can see the faces of departed loved ones just by looking at their photographs? A similar realization of the impossible is at work in the second couplet, which reads:

極國百年長不老 Hundreds of years may pass, but a state-topping beauty never grows old;

故人千里忽相看 Old friends a thousand miles apart can suddenly see each other.

The disjunction Ryūhoku identifies between the ageless beauty in the photograph and the presumably aging referent recalls Roland Barthes’ famous observation that “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”

The rift between the apparent reality of the photograph and our everyday experience of reality grows even wider in the third couplet:

各家君相一堂會 The lords and ministers from all around gathered together in one hall;

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11 I have replaced Rosny’s *kanojyo* with standard *kōna*.
Of course Fox Talbot’s desire to create unmediated images of nature was ultimately a fantasy impossible to realize, for his invention conditioned the very ways in which people saw and imagined the world. In her study of British literature in the age of photography, Nancy Armstrong discusses the process by which the modern perception of the world-as-image came into being in the mid-nineteenth century, a shift she describes in terms of an inversion of the traditional hierarchy of object over image: the “image visualized persons, places, and things inaccessible to the ordinary observer, thus expanding the observer’s visual universe” and what’s more, ultimately determined how they came to see not only a specific image but images in general. The proliferation of photography of course happened a bit later in Japan than it did in Britain, getting its real start in the early 1860s, but in no time, photographic images were bringing Japanese urbanites views not only of the exotic flora and fauna, architecture, and residents of foreign cities, but glimpses of themselves and of domestic scenes as well.

This gave the technology an especial currency and relevance to kanshi poets such as Sankei whose *Tokyo Camera* was part of a popular sub-category of kanshibun texts that focused attention on documenting contemporary urban scenes, pinpointing emerging trends and shifting customs, singling out certain distinctive features of particular objects and locales that helped to set the contours of the images readers had about them. In presenting a series of characteristic topical images of urban scenes through kanshi, these texts helped to construct a view of a given cityscape for readers both within and outside of the metropole. The analogy with the way photographs had begun to circulate was clear, and it was presumably this point of overlap that prompted Sankei to write his *Tōkei shashinbyō*. Yet while Sankei’s text clearly demonstrates the allure of photographic representation and its analogues, it also shows the author mounting a somewhat defensive resistance to it, asserting its limits lest the role of the creator be supplanted entirely.

In fact, as two of the writers who contributed prefaces to Sankei’s *Tōkei shashinbyō* made clear, while the technology of photography was unsurpassed in its ability to record the form of physical objects with accuracy and permanence, it was unable to capture human dimensions such as feelings and words, and this was precisely why Sankei’s poetic “photographs” were superior. For his part, Sankei also cited the apparent absence of human intervention from the construction of photographs as the medium’s greatest flaw. In the opening poem, Kikuchi plays on the word *kyō* (*kagami*) of *shashinbyō* (camera), faulting the camera for failing to be true to its name and serve as an instructive model for others:

 конкретнaя граfa Are you a mirror? No, you are no mirror, but just a picture.

写真真硬不须信 What you depict is very real, of that there is no doubt.

君不見人為鏡可知否 Yet know you nothing of taking other men as a mirror, to know good and bad?

以古為鏡見興衰 Of taking the past as a mirror, to see rise and fall?

14 The image is reproduced in Izaiguro.

15 See Izaiguro and Ishiguro (p. 155) for an example of another French spirit photograph included in the photograph album assembled by Ryūboku’s contemporary Mori Arimori.

This dramatic flourish earned Sankei plaudits from one of his commentators, Ema Tenkō (1825-1901), who compared the poet’s apostrophic address of the photograph to the stick used in a Zen monastery to admonish trainees.

And so, we can say that koshihon authors reacted with some ambivalence to photography; they were not simply dazzled by Wang Zhaojun’s new portrait – but were prodded to create both in response and in opposition to it. One reason the Wang Zhaojun legend was so frequently recounted and further embellished is that this beautiful yet unjustly misrepresented figure was the perfect stand-in for the talented yet unrecognized literatus who was thwarted by petty-minded officials. If Chōka, Kokô, Ryûhoku, and others were whimsically fantasizing that photography would have been a means to avoid Wang Zhaojun’s fate of misrecognition, then in the preface he contributed to Sankei’s collection, Ryûhoku imagined that Tôkei Shashinkyo might be the means of insuring not that the objects depicted be properly appreciated, but that the artist who created them, Kikuchi Sankei, and by extension other Japanese composers of koshihon, had their true talents recognized.

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