
The Introduction of Buddhism

THE SIXTH CENTURY inaugurated an epoch of great vitality in East Asia. After some three and a half centuries of disunion following the fall of the Han dynasty in 220, China was at length reunited under the Sui dynasty in 589. Although the T'ang replaced the Sui in 618, there was no further disruption of national unity for another three centuries.

The period of disunion in China produced conditions favorable to the spread of Buddhism, which had been introduced from India during the first century A.D., and it was largely as a Buddhist country that China entered its grand age of the T'ang dynasty (618–907). Buddhism had not only secured great numbers of religious converts in China; it had come to be regarded as virtually essential to the institutional centralization of the country, and its themes dominated the world of the visual arts.

Under the T'ang, China enjoyed its greatest national flourishing in history. Its borders were extended to their farthest limits, and Chinese culture radiated outward to neighboring lands. In East Asia, both Korea and Japan were profoundly influenced by T'ang China and underwent broad centralizing reforms on the Chinese model.

At mid-sixth century, Japan was divided into a number of territories controlled by aristocratic clans called *uji*. One clan—the imperial *uji*—had its seat in the central provinces and enjoyed a status approximating that of *primus inter pares* over most of the others, whose lands extended from Kyushu in the west to the eastern provinces of the Kantō. In northern Honshu, conditions were still unruly and barbarous.

Even at this time in Japanese history, there was a pronounced tendency for the heads of the non-imperial *uji* to assume, as ministers at court, much if not all of the emperor's political powers. Although there were a number of forceful sovereigns during the next few centuries, Japan's emperors have in general been noteworthy for the fact that they have reigned but have not ruled.

The word "emperor" is actually misleading when discussing this ancient age, for the emperor we find presiding over the loosely associated clans of the Yamato state in mid-sixth century appears, like a *kami* of primitive Shinto, only to have been relatively superior to or elevated above

the leaders of the other clans. Not until the next century did the Japanese, under the influence of Chinese monarchic ideas, transform their sovereign into a transcendently divine ruler, giving him the Chinese-sounding title of *tennō* that is always translated into English as emperor.

Although the Japanese thus created an exalted emperor figure on the Chinese model, they did not adopt the key Chinese Confucian theory of the emperor ruling through a mandate from heaven. A corollary to this theory was that a mandate granted by heaven to a virtuous ruler could be withdrawn from an unvirtuous one, and it was on the basis of this rationale that the Chinese justified or explained the periodic changes of dynasty in their history. In Japan, on the other hand, the native mythological assertion (noted in the last chapter) that the Sun Goddess had granted a mandate to the imperial family to rule eternally was retained, and the emperor line of the sixth century was thus enabled to achieve its extraordinary continuity of unbroken rulership throughout historic times until the present day.

Tradition has it that Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan from the Korean kingdom of Paekche in 552.¹ Since about a third of Japan's aristocracy was by that time of foreign descent, the Japanese undoubtedly already knew about Buddhism as well as the other major features of continental civilization. Nevertheless, it was over the issue of whether or not to accept Buddhism that a larger debate concerning national reform arose at the Japanese court in the second half of the sixth century.

Buddhism was at least a thousand years old when it entered Japan. It had emerged in northern India with the teachings of Gautama (ca. 563–483 B.C.), the historic Buddha, and had spread throughout the Indian subcontinent and into Southeast and East Asia. But it had become a complex, universalistic religion that embraced doctrines far removed from the basic tenets of its founder. Gautama, in his Four Noble Truths, had taught that (1) the world is a place of suffering; (2) suffering is caused by human desires and acquisitiveness; (3) something can be done to end suffering; and (4) the end of suffering and achievement of enlightenment or buddhahood lies in following a prescribed program known as the Eightfold Noble Path (right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). For most people, following the Eightfold Noble Path probably would not be easy. The doctrine of karma, or cause and effect, held that acts in previous existences were likely to have enmeshed one tightly in the web of desire and suffering and to have predestined one to at least several more cycles of death and rebirth.

These fundamental teachings of Buddhism, which the contemporary West has found appealing as a psychology, were greatly augmented some five centuries after Gautama's death with the advent of Mahayana, the Buddhism of the "Greater Vehicle." The believers in Mahayana depre-

catingly called the earlier form of Buddhism Hinayana, or the “Lesser Vehicle,” since it was essentially a body of doctrine designed to instruct individuals in how to achieve release from the cycle of life and death.² This, the Mahayanists asserted, implied that buddhahood was really open only to those with a special capacity to follow correctly the Eightfold Noble Path. They claimed—and indeed produced ancient scriptures to “prove”—that just before his death Gautama had revealed the ultimate truth that all living things have the potentiality for buddhahood. The Mahayanists, moreover, came increasingly to regard Gautama as a transcendent, rather than simply a mortal, being and gave reverence to a new figure, the bodhisattva or “buddha-to-be,” who has met all the requirements for buddhahood but in his great compassion has postponed his entry into that state in order to assist others in their quest for release from the cycle of life and death. In contrast to Hinayana, which could be considered “selfish” because it urged people to devote themselves solely to attainment of their own enlightenments, Mahayana preached universal love, through the ideal of the bodhisattva, for all beings, animal as well as human.

The Mahayana school of Buddhism, which had its greatest flourishing in East Asia, also accumulated a vast and bewildering pantheon of buddhas and other exalted beings, some of whom were taken from Hinduism and even from the religions of the Near East. In an effort to categorize and account for the roles of these myriad deities, the Mahayanists formulated the theory of the “three forms” of the buddha: his all-embracing, universal, or cosmic form, his transcendent form, in which he might appear as any one of many heavenly figures, such as the healing buddha (in Japanese, Yakushi), the buddha of the future (Miroku), and the buddha of the boundless light (Amida); and his transformation form, or the body he assumed when he existed on earth as Gautama. Without knowledge of this theory of the three forms, one cannot understand the interrelationship among the various Buddhist sects that appeared successively in Japanese history.

It is difficult to gauge the precise impact of Buddhism in Japan during the first century or so after its introduction. In China, it had already proliferated into a number of abstruse metaphysical sects, within both the Hinayana and Mahayana schools, that could scarcely have appealed to the Japanese beyond a small circle of intellectuals at court. As others outside this circle gradually became aware of Buddhism, they apparently regarded it at first as a new and potent form of magic for ensuring more abundant harvests and for warding off calamities. They also responded directly and intuitively to the wonders of Buddhist art as these were displayed in the sculpture, painting, and temple architecture brought to Japan. Moreover, the Japanese probably accepted with little difficulty the validity of Buddhism’s most fundamental premises: that all things are impermanent,

suffering is universal, and man is the helpless victim of his fate. People in many ages have held these or similar propositions to be true, and we should not be surprised to find the Japanese of this period accepting them in the persuasive language of Buddhism.

Possibly the strongest feeling the Japanese of the seventh and eighth centuries came to have about Buddhism was that it was an essential quality of higher civilization. It is ironic that this religion, which in its origins viewed the world with extreme pessimism and gave no thought to social or political reform, should enter Japan from China as the carrier of such multifarious aspects of civilization, including the ideal of state centralization.

It is impossible to explain in a few words, or perhaps even in many, how primitive Shinto managed to survive the influx of Buddhism. Part of the answer lies in the unusual tolerance of Eastern religious thought in general for "partial" or "alternative" truths and its capacity to synthesize seemingly disparate beliefs and manifestations of the divine. In Japan, for example, the principal *kami* of Shinto came to be regarded as Buddhist deities in different forms, and Shinto shrines were even amalgamated with Buddhist temples. Another reason why the Japanese throughout the ages have with little or no difficulty considered themselves to be both Shintoists and Buddhists is that the doctrines of the two religions complement each other so neatly. Shinto expresses a simple and direct love of nature and its vital reproductive forces, and regards death simply as one of many kinds of defilement. Buddhism, on the other hand, is concerned with life's interminable suffering and seeks to guide living beings on the path to enlightenment. It is fitting that even today in Japan the ceremonies employed to celebrate such events as birth and marriage are Shinto, whereas funerals and communion with the dead are within the purview of Buddhism.

The dispute in Japan in the mid-sixth century over whether or not to accept Buddhism, and at the same time to undertake national reforms, divided the Japanese court into two opposing camps. One consisted of families which, as Shinto ritualists and elite imperial guards, felt most threatened by the changes Buddhism portended; the other camp, including the Soga family, took a progressive position in favor of Buddhism and reform. In the late 580s, the Soga prevailed militarily over their opponents and, further strengthened by marriage ties to the imperial family, inaugurated an epoch of great renovation in Japan.

The most important leader of the early years of reform was Prince Shōtoku (574–622), who with Soga blessing became crown prince and regent for an undistinguished empress (fig. 8). Shōtoku has been greatly idealized in history, and it is difficult to judge how much credit he truly deserves for the measures and policies attributed to him. Yet, he seems ardently to have loved learning and probably he was instrumental in ex-



Fig. 8 Lacquered wooden statue of Prince Shōtoku, Edo period (*Honolulu Academy of Arts, Gift of Nathan V. Hammer, 1953 [1804.1]*)

panding the relations with Sui China that were critical at this time to the advancement of Japanese civilization. Quite likely it was also Shōtoku who wrote the note to the Sui court in 607 that began: "From the sovereign of the land of the rising sun to the sovereign of the land of the setting sun." The Sui emperor did not appreciate this lack of respect and refused to reply; but the note made an important point. In earlier centuries, rulers of the land of Wa, such as Himiko of Yamatai, had sent missions to China. Henceforth, however, Japan intended to uphold its independence and would not accept the status of humble subordination expected of countries that sent tribute to mighty China.

Formerly, the Japanese had called their country Yamato, but sometime in the seventh century they adopted the designation of Nihon (or Nippon), written with the Chinese characters for "sun" and "source." Apparently they hoped that this designation, derived from the fact that Japan's location in the sea to the east made it the "source of the sun," would give them greater prestige in the eyes of the Chinese. Whether or not it did, eventually it was the Chinese pronunciation of Nihon—Jihpen—that was transmitted back to Europe by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century and incorporated into the European tongues in forms like the English "Japan."

The Japanese dispatched a total of four missions to Sui China during the period 600–614 and fifteen to T'ang between 630 and 838. The larger missions usually consisted of groups of about four ships that transported more than five hundred people, including official envoys, students, Buddhist monks, and translators. Some of these visitors remained abroad for long periods of time—up to thirty or more years—and some never returned. The trip was exceedingly dangerous, and the fact that so many risked it attests to the avidity with which the Japanese of this age sought to acquire the learning and culture of China.

Although there are no replicas or contemporary drawings of the ships used in the missions to Sui and T'ang, we know that their sail and rudder systems were primitive and that they were obliged to rely on the seasonal winds. They usually left in the spring, when the prevailing winds were westward, and returned in the winter, when the winds blew to the east. The shortest route to the continent was across the 115-mile channel that separates Kyushu from southern Korea. But sometimes the Japanese ships were blown off course and drifted far down the Chinese coast. During most of the seventh century, when relations with Korea were poor, the Japanese set sail directly for South China, although the passage was longer and more difficult. The return trip, which almost always began from the mouth of the Yangtze River, was the most treacherous of all. A miscalculation or an accidental alteration in course could carry the ships into the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Often they landed on islands in the Ryukyu chain and were obliged to make their way home as best they could.

Dangerous as they were, the missions to China from the seventh through the mid-ninth centuries were essential to the establishment of Japan's first centralized state. The Japanese borrowed freely from a civilization that, at least in material and technological terms, was vastly superior to their own. Yet Japan's cultural borrowing was sufficiently selective to bring about the evolution of a society which, although it owed much to China, became unique in its own right.

The influence of Korea in this transmission of Chinese civilization to Japan has not yet received adequate attention among scholars. During the first century or so A.D., Japan's relations with Korea had been close, and various Japanese tribal states had dispatched missions to China via the Han Chinese military commanderies in Korea. Sometime in the late fourth century, as observed in the last chapter, Japan established Mimana on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula; and for the next two hundred years Japanese armies were involved in the endless struggles for supremacy among Korea's three kingdoms of Paekche, Silla, and Koguryō. By the sixth century, Japan had come in general to support Paekche—which is credited with officially introducing Buddhism to the Yamato court in 552—against the rising might of Silla. But Japan's efforts were not sufficient to alter the trend of events in Korea. Silla destroyed Mimana in 562, Paekche in 663, and Koguryō in 668; it thereby unified Korea as a centralized state on the lines of T'ang China, much like the newly reformed state that was emerging in Japan during the same period.

Koreans and Chinese had migrated to Japan from at least the beginning of the fifth century. But during Silla's rise to power the number of immigrants from the continent—especially refugees from Paekche and Koguryō—increased substantially, as we can tell from accounts of how they were given land and allowed to settle in different parts of the country. Throughout the seventh century, which was of course the great age of reform, these Korean immigrants played a vital role as scribes, craftsmen, and artists in the advancement of culture and civilization in Japan.

Prince Shōtoku and other Japanese intellectuals of the early reform period studied not only Buddhism but also the teachings of Chinese Confucianism. Like Buddhism, Confucianism was about a millenium old when it entered Japan and it had expanded greatly beyond the simple humanism of Confucius (551–479 B.C.) and his followers. The early Confucianists were concerned with man in society, and not with metaphysical speculation: they preached the cultivation of virtue and its application to public service. In his famous Seventeen-Article Constitution of 604, Prince Shōtoku, in addition to calling for the reverence of Buddhism, sought also to propagate Confucian values among the Japanese.³ Indeed, the Constitution is mainly a Confucian document. Although it may appear to be a collection of simplistic maxims—for example, that harmony should be prized (Article I) and that ministers should obey imperial com-

mands (III), behave decorously (IV), reject covetous desires (V), and attend court early in the morning (VIII)—it is the first statement in Japanese history of the need for ethical government. Addressed primarily to Japan's ministerial class, the Constitution, in characteristic Confucian fashion, offers general principles of guidance for rule by moral suasion rather than compulsion, which requires detailed laws with specified punishments.

Scholars have long questioned whether the Seventeen-Article Constitution, which appears in *Nihon Shoki*, a work compiled more than a century later, could truly have been written by Prince Shōtoku, inasmuch as it contains ideas and principles that the Japanese were not likely to have stressed or adopted until the late seventh or early eighth centuries, when state centralization, based on continued borrowing from the continent, was more advanced. Reference to the office of "provincial governor," for example, seems anachronistic, since that office was not established until the late 600s. Also questionable, in the minds of some scholars, is whether the principle of supreme imperial rule as set forth in the following articles of the Constitution could have been articulated and subscribed to by the Japanese as early as 604: "When you receive imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them. The lord is Heaven, the vassal is Earth. Heaven overspreads, and Earth upbears. When this is so, the four seasons follow their due course, and the powers of Nature obtain their efficacy" (III); and "In a country there are not two lords; the people have not two masters. The sovereign is the master of the people of the whole country" (XII).

These are lofty Chinese ideas about emperorship, which hold that the emperor not only enjoyed absolute authority over all the people but, in the proper exercise of his office, was essential to the basic functioning of nature itself. Nor is anything said in these or other articles of the Constitution about the native deities, the *kami*, whose supreme representative, Amaterasu the Sun Goddess, is said by *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, as we have seen, to have mandated the imperial family's right to rule forever. In other words, the Constitution is silent about what subsequently became the unassailable basis for the legitimacy of single-dynasty rule in Japan: Amaterasu's mandate. During the early and middle seventh century the Japanese appear to have experimented with various ideas, drawn from Confucianism and Buddhism as well as Shinto, to justify imperial rule. Probably not until the late seventh and early eighth centuries did they finally settle on the Shinto interpretation, as reflected in Amaterasu's mandate, and codify it for all future generations in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*.

Despite Prince Shōtoku's efforts to stimulate central reform, very little of real significance could be achieved so long as the aristocratic clans continued to exercise almost complete autonomy over their lands and the

people on them. After Shōtoku's death in 622, the Soga, who had been the progressive advocates of Buddhism and the adoption of Chinese culture a half-century earlier, became the chief obstacles to reform of the decentralized *uji* system. In the early 640s, there formed at court an anti-Soga faction that included an imperial prince, leaders of various ministerial houses, and men who had studied in China. In 645 this group forcibly overthrew the Soga, reasserted the supremacy of the throne (the Soga were accused of having plotted to supplant the imperial family), and instituted the reform of Taika ("Great Change").

The Taika Reform was essentially a land reform patterned on the institutions of T'ang China. Although a paucity of records makes it impossible to determine just how extensively it was carried out, the intent of the Reform was to nationalize all agricultural land—that is, to make it the emperor's land—and to render all the people of the country direct subjects of the throne. Land was then to be parceled out in equal plots to farmers to work during their lifetimes. Upon the death of a farmer, his plot would revert back to the state for redistribution.

This is a gross oversimplification of the provisions of the Taika Reform, but it will suffice to show the idealistic concept of land equalization upon which the Reform rested. This concept had evolved from Confucian egalitarianism, which held that the equal division of land would render the people content and harmonious. Equality, however, was to apply only to the lower, peasant class of society. Members of the aristocracy were to receive special emoluments of land based on considerations such as rank, office, and meritorious service. In this way, the aristocracy was enabled to remain about as privileged economically as it had been before the Reform.

In practice, then, the equal-field system of the Taika Reform was only equal for some people. Moreover, its conscientious implementation would have required an administrative organization far more elaborate than Japan possessed in this age. Perhaps we should marvel that the system worked as effectively as it did; yet within a century it had begun to decay. The aristocratic families, along with Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, started to accumulate private estates that were in many ways similar to the territorial holdings of the pre-Taika *uji*. (We may note that the equal-field system fared little better in T'ang China, the land of its birth. After the failure of this system later during the T'ang, China never again in premodern times attempted to nationalize land and parcel it out by allotment at the local level to individuals or families.)

Another major act of reform was the promulgation by the court, in 702, of the Taihō ("Great Treasure") Code, which specified the central and provincial offices of the new government (some of which were already functioning) and set forth general laws of conduct for the Japanese people. Also modeled on T'ang, the Taihō Code provided Japan with an

elaborate and symmetrical bureaucratic structure of the sort that had evolved over a millennium or more in China. Although it functioned smoothly enough through most of the eighth century, it ultimately proved too weighty and inflexible for Japan in this early stage of its historical development. Beginning in the ninth century, new offices that were opened outside the provisions of the Taihō Code successively became the real centers of national power in Japan.

In 710 the court moved to the newly constructed city of Nara, which remained the capital of Japan until 784. Before this move, the site of the court had often been shifted, usually in and around the central provinces. Some claim that the Shinto view of death as a defilement—and the death of a sovereign as the defilement of an entire community—was the main reason for this constant moving about. But another likely reason is that the loose control of the Yamato court over the territorial *uji* in earlier centuries necessitated its frequent transfer from place to place for strategic purposes. When the Soga became politically dominant in the late sixth century, they established the court at Asuka to the south of present-day Nara, where their seat of territorial power was located.

The epoch from the introduction of Buddhism in 552 until the Taika Reform of 645 is generally known in art history as the Asuka period. Most, if not all, of the Buddhist statuary, painting, and temple architecture of the Asuka period was produced by Chinese and Korean craftsmen. It is therefore not until a later age that we can speak of the true beginnings of Japanese Buddhist art. Nevertheless, the treasures of the Asuka period, which are in the manner of China's Six Dynasties era (220–589), are of inestimable value not only because of their individual merits but also because they constitute the largest body of Six Dynasties-style art extant. Owing to warfare and other vicissitudes, few examples remain in China or Korea.

Although the first Buddhist temples in Japan were constructed by the Soga in the late sixth century, none has survived. Of the buildings still standing, by far the oldest—and indeed the oldest wooden buildings in the world—are at the Hōryūji Temple, located to the southwest of Nara. Originally constructed in 607 under the patronage of Prince Shōtoku, the Hōryūji may have been partly or entirely destroyed by fire in 670 and rebuilt shortly after the turn of the century. Even so, it contains buildings that clearly antedate those of any other temple in Japan.

Buddhist temples of this age were arranged in patterns known as *garan*. Although the *garan* varied in the number and arrangement of their structures, they usually had certain common features: a roofed gallery in the form of a square or rectangle, with an entrance gate in the center of its southern side, that enclosed the main compound of the temple; a so-called golden hall to house the temple's principal images of devotion; a lecture hall; and at least one pagoda, a type of building derived from the



Fig. 9 Garan of the Hōryūji Temple (*Consulate General of Japan, New York*)



Fig. 10 Golden Hall of the Hōryūji Temple (*photograph by Joseph Shulman*)

Indian stupa and originally intended to contain the relic of a Buddhist saint. At the Hōryūji, the golden hall and a single, five-storied pagoda are located to the right and left inside the entrance gate, and the lecture hall is to the rear of the compound, actually integrated into the northern side of the gallery (figs. 9–10). The chief characteristics of the golden hall are its raised stone base and its hipped and gabled upper roof; as probably the oldest of the Hōryūji buildings, it is especially representative of the Buddhist architectural style of the Six Dynasties period.

Among the statuary in the golden hall is a trinity of figures in bronze, set in relief against flaming body halos. According to an inscription, this was cast in 623 to commemorate the death of Prince Shōtoku the year before (fig. 11). It shows the historical Buddha, Gautama (in Japanese, Shaka), flanked by two attendant bodhisattvas. The Buddha is seated



Fig. 11 Shaka trinity at the Hōryūji Temple (*Asuka-en*)

cross-legged on a dais with his clothing draped in the stylized waterfall pattern of the Six Dynasties period. He also strikes one of the many mudras or special hand positions of Buddhist iconography (the upraised hand here gives assurance against fear and the open palm is a sign of charity); and he has a protuberance on his head and a third eye that indicate extraordinary knowledge and vision and are among some twenty-three bodily signs introduced by the Mahayana Buddhists to indicate Gautama's superhuman qualities. The expression on the faces of all three figures of the trinity is that known as the "archaic smile," whose impersonality and vague mysteriousness contrast strikingly with the unabashed frankness we noted in the countenances of many of the early native *haniwa* figurines of human beings.

The bodhisattvas stand on pedestals of lotus blossoms and are attired in the sort of princely garb that Gautama wore before he renounced the world. In the Buddhist tradition, the lotus, which may be found floating on the surface of the murkiest water, stands for purity. It can also symbolize the universe, with each of its petals representing a separate, constituent world.

Two excellent examples of wooden sculpture from the Asuka period are the figure in the Hōryūji of the bodhisattva Kannon, known as the Kudara Kannon, and the seated image in a nearby nunnery of Miroku, the buddha of the future (figs. 12–13). Both statues have features of the Six Dynasties style—for example, the stiff, saw-toothed drapery of the Kannon and the waterfall pattern in the lower folds of the Miroku's clothing. Yet, there is also in both a suggestion of the voluptuousness and earthly sensuality that were to appear later in the sculpture of the T'ang. The Miroku, whose surface appears like metal after centuries of rubbing with incense, has been particularly admired for its tender, dreamlike expression and for the gentle manner in which the hand is raised to the face. It strikes a mudra characteristic of Miroku statues.

The art epoch from the Taika Reform of 645 until the founding of the great capital city of Nara in 710 is usually called the Hakuho period after one of the calendrical designations of the age. It was a time of vigorous reforming effort in Japan, directed by the imperial family itself; and some of the more powerful sovereigns in Japanese history ruled during the Hakuho period. Of these, it was the emperor Temmu (reigned 673–86) who first advanced Buddhism as the great protector of the country and of the imperial family. Buddhism had previously been patronized by individuals, such as Prince Shōtoku and certain chieftains of the Soga family. Under Temmu and his successors, Buddhism received the official patronage of the court, which sponsored the construction of a series of great temples during the late seventh and eighth centuries.

In both sculpture and painting, the Hakuho period marked the transition in Japan, after a time lag of about a half-century, from the Bud-



Fig. 12 Miroku buddha (*Asuka-en*)

dhist art style of China's Six Dynasties era to that of the T'ang. A bronze trinity (now situated in the Yakushiji Temple in Nara) of Yakushi, the healing buddha, and two attendant bodhisattvas exemplifies the great T'ang style of sculpture as it was produced in Japan (fig. 14). The main elements of this style can perhaps best be seen in the figures of the bodhisattvas: for example, in their sensuously curved and fleshy bodies, their raised hairstyling, and their more naturally hanging draperies.

The finest examples of painting from the Hakuho period are the frescoes that adorn the interior of the golden hall at the Horyuji. Although a fire in 1949 badly damaged these frescoes, photographs show how they formerly appeared. An attendant bodhisattva in one of the trinities depicted was especially well preserved and has been widely admired as one of the best examples of T'ang painting (fig. 15). Quite sim-

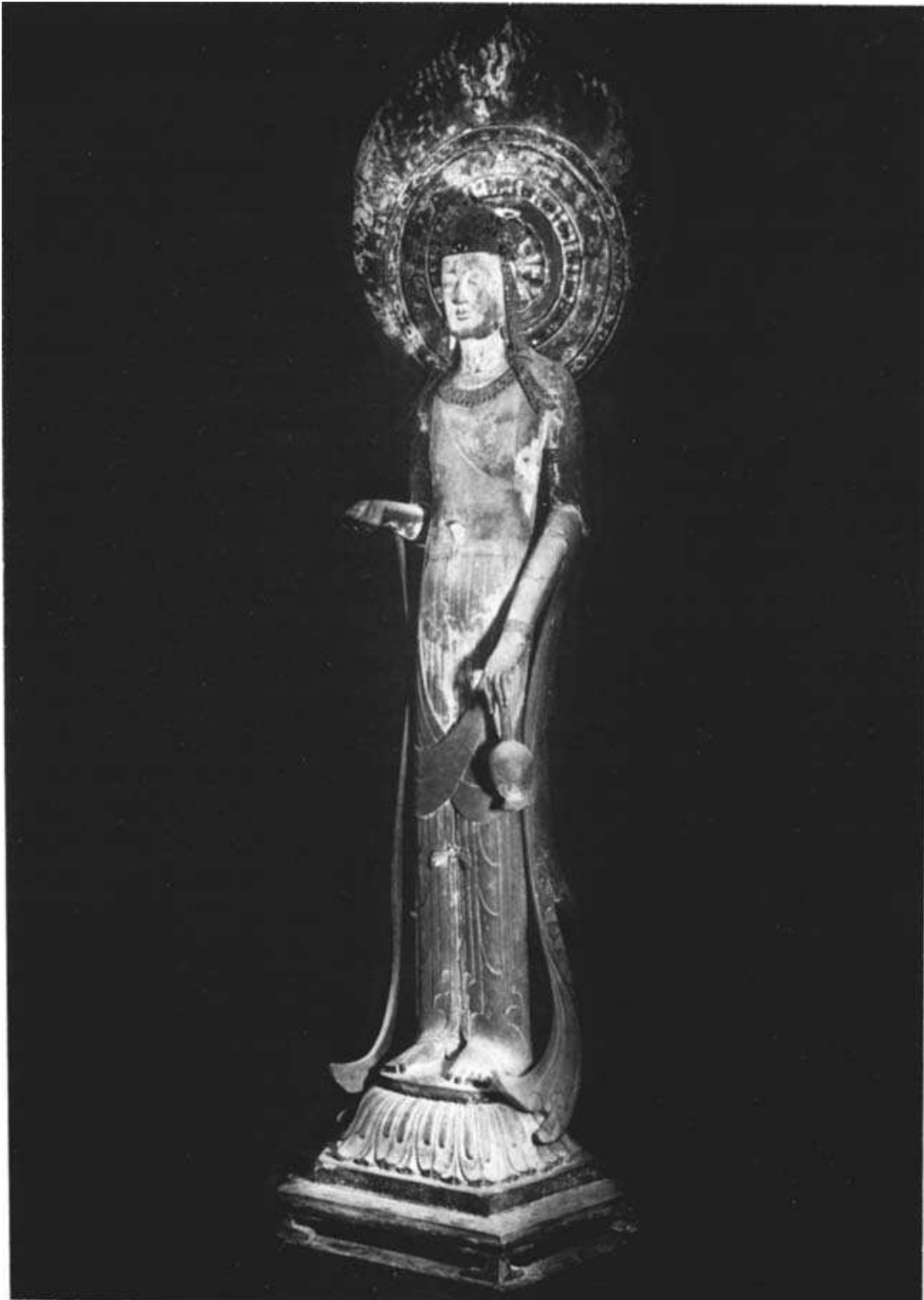


Fig. 13 Kudara Kannon at the Hōryūji Temple (*Asuka-en*)

ilar in appearance to the bodhisattvas in the Yakushi trinity of bronze statues, it shows the great skill in linear technique of the artist of this age. Its even lines have been called wirelike in contrast to the alternately thick and thin lines, derived from the brushwork of calligraphy, that were later so favored by painters in China and Japan.



Fig. 14 From the Yakushi trinity at the Yakushiji Temple
(*Asuka-en*)

The site for Nara was chosen by Chinese geomancy, the art of selecting suitable terrain on the basis of the favorable arrangement of its surrounding hills and the auspicious character of its “wind and water.” Modeled after the T’ang capital of Ch’ang-an, although on a smaller scale, Nara was laid out in orderly fashion with the palace enclosure in the north-center, a grand boulevard running down its middle to the city’s main gate of entrance in the south, and evenly intersecting north-south and east-west avenues. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese never constructed walled cities; and although the population of Nara probably reached two hundred thousand in the eighth century, making it Japan’s first truly urban center, contemporary accounts describe it as a city of open spaces with many fields interspersed among the buildings.

The orderliness of the original plan for Nara paralleled the balanced arrangement of the governmental offices and boards elaborated in the Taihō Code, and reflected the fundamental Chinese taste for symmetry in such matters. Some have speculated that the Japanese, on the other hand, inherently prefer asymmetry. In any case, just as they ultimately



Fig. 15 Attendant bodhisattva: detail of fresco in the Golden Hall of the Hōryūji Temple (*Asuka-en*)

deviated from China's form of a balanced bureaucracy, the Japanese also failed to develop Nara as planned. The present city lies almost entirely in the northeastern suburbs of the eighth-century plan, and only recently placed markers enable us to see where the palace enclosure and other important sites of the original Nara were located. Kyoto, which became the seat of the court in 794 after its move from Nara, was also laid out symmetrically like Ch'ang-an; and it too spread erratically, primarily into the northeastern suburbs. But, whereas Kyoto was often devastated by warfare and other disasters during the medieval period and has few buildings within its city limits that predate the sixteenth century, Nara has retained substantially intact a number of splendid edifices and their contents dating from the eighth century.

Even today, the visitor to Nara can recapture much of the splendor of the brilliant youth of Japanese civilization. Nevertheless, it is difficult, in view of the later introversion of Japanese society, to envision how extraordinarily cosmopolitan Nara must have been in the eighth century. The Japanese of the Nara period were the eager pupils of Chinese civiliza-

tion, and T'ang China was then the greatest empire in the world. The Buddhist art of China, which the Japanese fervently emulated, was an amalgam of many influences, not only from India but also from regions as remote as Persia, Greece, and the Byzantine empire, all of which were in contact with China by means of the overland caravan route known as the Silk Road. *Objets d'art*, many still preserved in Nara, were imported from these exotic places; and the Japanese court of the eighth century welcomed visitors from India and other parts of Asia outside China, visitors of a variety that would not appear in Japan again until modern times.

One unusual aspect of Nara civilization was the degree of dependence of the Japanese on the Chinese written language. There is no archaeological or other evidence to indicate that the Japanese ever independently attempted to devise a script of their own. The apparent reason is simply that, in remote times, they became aware of the sophisticated writing system of China and, as they advanced in the ways of civilization, were content to use Chinese for purposes other than speech, much as Latin was employed in Europe during the Middle Ages.

This could not, however, be a permanently satisfactory arrangement, since structurally the Chinese and Japanese languages are vastly different. Chinese is monosyllabic, terse, and has no grammatical inflections. Tense and mood are either ignored or expressed by means of syntax and word position within a sentence. Japanese, on the other hand, is polysyllabic, diffuse and, like the Indo-European tongues, highly inflected.

After some fumbling starts in the Nara period, the Japanese in the ninth century finally evolved a syllabary of approximately fifty symbols (derived from Chinese characters) called *kana*. Although they could thenceforth theoretically write their language exclusively in *kana*, they had by this time also imported a great number of Chinese words into their vocabulary, words that were most appropriately written with Chinese characters (even though they were pronounced differently in Japanese).

Ultimately, the Japanese came to write in a mixture of Chinese characters and *kana*. In the modern language, the characters are used mainly for substantives, adjectives, and verbal stems, and the *kana* symbols are employed as grammatical markers and for the writing (among other things) of adverbs and foreign names. There is little question that Japanese is the most complex written language in the world today, and the modern man who holds utility to be the ultimate value must sorely lament that the Japanese ever became burdened with the Chinese writing system. Yet, from the aesthetic standpoint, the Chinese characters have been infinitely enriching, and through the centuries have provided an intimate cultural bond between the Chinese and Japanese (as well as the Koreans, who have also utilized Chinese characters) that is one of the most significant features of East Asian civilization.

The oldest extant books of the Japanese, as we have seen, are two works of myth and history entitled *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, completed in 712 and 720, respectively. Prince Shōtoku supposedly wrote texts a century earlier on both Buddhism and history, but these were destroyed in the burning of the Soga family's library at the time of the 645 Taika coup.

It is fitting that Japan's earliest remaining works, composed at a time when the country was so strongly under the civilizing influence of China, should be of a historical character. In the Confucian tradition, the writing of history has always been held in the highest esteem, since Confucianists believe that the lessons of the past provide the best guide for ethical rule in the present and future. In contrast to the Indians, who have always been absorbed with metaphysical and religious speculation and scarcely at all with history, the Chinese are among the world's greatest record-keepers. They revere the written word, no doubt even more so because of the evocative nature of their ideographic script, and they transmitted this reverence for writing to the Japanese at an early date.

The *Kojiki* consists of an account of Japan from its creation to approximately the year A.D. 500, plus additional genealogical data about the imperial family for the next century and a quarter. Unreliable as history, it is written in a complex style that employs Chinese characters both in the conventional manner and to represent phonetically the sounds of the Japanese language of the eighth century. Because of its difficulty, the *Kojiki* received scant attention for more than a thousand years; not until the great eighteenth-century scholar Motoori Norinaga devoted more than three decades to its decipherment did its contents become widely known even among the Japanese.

The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (whose first part covers much the same ground) are, as noted, the principal repositories of Japan's extraordinarily rich mythology, a mythology derived from a variety of materials including ancient songs and legends, word etymologies, professed genealogies, and religious rites. Although the two works contain numerous variant tales, they give essentially the same account of the course of Japan up to the eve of recorded history in the sixth century. Japanese scholars of the twentieth century have proved conclusively that this central narrative of myths, which tells of the descent of the imperial family from the omnipotent Sun Goddess and its assumption of eternal rule on earth, was entirely contrived sometime during the reform period of the late sixth and seventh centuries to justify the claim to sovereignty of the reigning imperial dynasty. Moreover, both books, but particularly the *Kojiki*, have been shaped to give antiquity and luster to the genealogies of the leading courtier families of the same period.

In contrast to the *Kojiki*, the *Nihon Shoki* is written in Chinese and has been read and studied throughout the ages. It is also a much longer

work and contains, in addition to the mythology, a generally reliable history of the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, as virtually the only written source for affairs in Japan during this age, it became the first of six “national histories” that cover events up to 887.

Nara civilization reached its apogee in the Tempyō epoch of Emperor Shōmu (reigned 724–49). Shōmu is remembered as perhaps the most devoutly Buddhist emperor in Japanese history, and certainly Buddhism enjoyed unprecedented favor during his reign. Yet, this favor seems to have been based more on adoration than understanding. The so-called six sects of Nara Buddhism were highly complex metaphysical systems imported from China that, doctrinally, provided little more than intellectual exercise for a handful of priestly devotees in Japan. Some were never established as independent sects, and none acquired a significant following among the Japanese people.

Judged by the great rage at Nara for the copying of sutras to obtain health and prosperity, Buddhism still held its appeal as potent magic. The particular favor enjoyed by the healing buddha, Yakushi, suggests that the primitive faith-healing instincts of the Japanese were widely aroused by this popular Mahayanist deity.

But by far the most significant role of Buddhism in the Tempyō epoch was as the great protector of the state. Shōmu, who founded a national Buddhist center at the Tōdaiji Temple in Nara and caused branch temples and nunneries to be constructed in the provinces, carried to its climax the policy of state sponsorship of Buddhism inaugurated by Temmu half a century earlier. Ironically, Shōmu’s great undertaking so taxed the public resources of the Nara court that, far from strengthening central rule as he wished, it was probably the single most important factor in stimulating a decline in national administration over the next century and a half.

Whatever the long-range effects of its construction on the course of political events, the Tōdaiji became one of the greatest Buddhist establishments in Japan and the focal point for the brilliant age of Tempyō art (fig. 16). Compared to the Hōryūji, the Tōdaiji was laid out on a mammoth scale. It was spread over an extensive tract of land and its central image, housed in the largest wooden structure in the world, was a bronze statue fifty-three feet tall of the cosmic buddha Vairochana (called in Japanese *daibutsu* or “great buddha”) that required eight attempts before it was successfully cast (fig. 17). At the *daibutsu*’s “eye-opening” ceremony in 752, when a cleric from India painted in the pupils of its eyes to give it symbolic life, there were some ten thousand Buddhist priests in attendance and many visitors from distant lands. It was by all accounts one of the grandest occasions in early Japanese history.

Shortly before the eye-opening ceremony, Shōmu, who in 749 had abdicated the throne in favor of his daughter, appeared before the *daibutsu* and humbly declared himself a servant to the three Buddhist trea-



Fig. 16 Tōdaiji Temple (*Consulate General of Japan, New York*)



Fig. 17 Daibutsu at the Tōdaiji Temple (*Consulate General of Japan, New York*)



Fig. 18 Guardian deity in dry lacquer at the Tōdaiji Temple (*Charles E. Tuttle Publishing Co.*)

tures (the buddha, the law, and the priesthood). This act was the high point in the Nara court's public infatuation with Buddhism. Although many later sovereigns were personally devout Buddhists, none after Shōmu ever made this sort of official gesture of submission to Buddhism or to any religion other than Shinto.

Among the many excellent examples of Tempyō art at the Tōdaiji are statues in two new mediums, clay and dry lacquer. In the unusual technique of dry lacquer sculpture, the artist began with either a clay base or a wooden frame and built up a shell consisting of alternate layers of fabric—mainly hemp—and lacquer. The very nature of the material made a certain stiffness in the trunks and limbs of the finished figures inevitable. Nevertheless, as can clearly be seen in one of the fierce guardian deities at the Tōdaiji, the sculptors in dry lacquer were able to achieve much of the realistic detailing that was so characteristic of the T'ang-inspired art of the Tempyō period (fig. 18).

The most famous work in dry lacquer is the image at the Tōshōdaiji in Nara of the blind Chinese priest Ganjin (688–763), who after several unsuccessful attempts made the perilous crossing to Japan in 754 to found one of the six Nara sects (fig. 19). This is the oldest surviving portrait of an actual person in Japanese history. There is a painting from the late seventh century of Prince Shōtoku and two of his sons, but it



Fig. 19 Statue of Ganjin at the Tōshōdaiji Temple (*Asuka-en*)

was done many years after the prince's death and was drawn in such a stylized Chinese fashion that the artist obviously made no attempt to portray the features of real individuals. The Ganjin statue, on the other hand, is extraordinarily lifelike and shows the priest in an attitude of intense concentration. It was this kind of emotionally moving realism that so greatly impressed Japanese sculptors of later centuries when they looked back for inspiration to the classical art of the Tempyō period.

Near the Tōdaiji and originally part of the temple complex is a remarkable building called the Shōsōin (fig. 20). It has the appearance of a gigantic, elongated log cabin with its floor raised some nine feet off the ground on massive wooden pillars. Actually, the Shōsōin consists of three separate units that are joined together, each with its own entrance-way, and it is a storehouse of world art from the eighth century. It has stood intact for more than eleven centuries and before modern times was opened only infrequently, sometimes remaining sealed for periods of



Fig. 20 Shōsōin (*Asuka-en*)

up to a century or more. Because of its special construction—in addition to a raised floor, it has sides made of logs that expand and contract to maintain the temperature and humidity inside at a more even level—the Shōsōin has preserved its contents in nearly perfect condition.

Of the ten thousand or so items contained in the Shōsōin, more than six hundred were the personal belongings of Emperor Shōmu; they include books, clothing, swords and other weapons, Buddhist rosaries, musical instruments, mirrors, screens, and gaming boards. There are also the ritual objects used in the eye-opening ceremony for the *daibutsu*, as well as many maps, administrative documents, medicines, and masks of wood and dry lacquer used in *gigaku*, a form of dance learned from China that was popular at Buddhist temples during the Nara period.

The imported objects come from virtually every part of the known world of Asia and Europe—including China, Southeast and Central Asia, India, Arabia, Persia, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome—and include a vast variety of fabrics, household belongings, blown and cut glass, ceramicware, paintings, and statuary.

The outpouring of visual art in the Tempyō period was accompanied by the first great blossoming of Japanese poetry. Although there are a number of simple and artless songs in both the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* and although efforts to poetize are very ancient in Japan, the compilation about mid-eighth century of the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of a Myriad Leaves*) marked the true beginning of the Japanese poetic tradition. A

lengthy collection of some 4,500 poems, the *Man'yōshū* is not only Japan's first anthology but in the minds of many the finest, astonishing as this may seem for so early a work. Some of the *Man'yōshū* poems are spuriously attributed to emperors and other lofty individuals of the fourth and fifth centuries, an age shrouded in myth, and a great many more are anonymous. Its poems appear in fact to constitute a sampling of composition from about the middle of the seventh century to the middle of the eighth, although we cannot know how representative this sampling is of all the poems that must have been written in Japan during that period.

Several features of the *Man'yōshū* set it apart from later anthologies. First, it possesses a kind of native freshness and youthful vigor in its verses that was lost in later centuries after Japanese culture had been more fully transformed by the influence of continental civilization. Second, its poems appear to have been written by people from many classes of society, including peasants, frontier guards, and even beggars, as well as the aristocrats who through much of the premodern era completely monopolized poetic composition. Some modern scholars believe that those *Man'yōshū* poems whose authors appear to have been non-aristocratic were, in reality, composed by courtiers who "went primitive." Nevertheless, the poems were at least written from the standpoint of the non-aristocrat, a fact that distinguishes them from virtually all the other poetry composed in Japan for many centuries to come.

A third feature of the *Man'yōshū* is the variety (by Japanese standards) of its poetic forms. Included in it are a number of so-called long poems (*chōka*) that possess a considerable grandeur and sweep. Yet, even at this time the Japanese showed a marked preference for shorter verse, and the great majority of poems in the *Man'yōshū* are in the *waka*⁴ form of thirty-one syllables—consisting of five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables—that was employed almost exclusively by poets for the next five hundred years or more. Even when poets once again turned to other forms, they usually selected those that were variants of the *waka*. For example, the linked verse that became popular from about the fourteenth century on was composed by three or more poets who divided the *waka* into two "links" (one made up of the first three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables and the other of the last two lines of 7 and 7 syllables), which could be joined together endlessly. And the famous seventeen-syllable *haiku* that came into fashion in the seventeenth century consisted simply of the first link of the *waka*.

No complete explanation can be given of the Japanese predilection for brief poetry, but it is certainly due in large part to the nature of the Japanese language. Japanese has very few vowel sounds and is constructed almost solely of independent vowels (*a, i, u, e, o*) and short, "open" syllables that consist of a consonant and a vowel (for example, *ka, su, mo*).

The language therefore lacks the variety of sound necessary for true poetic rhyme: indeed, it rhymes too readily. Moreover, it has little stress, another element often used in prosody. Without recourse to rhyme or stress, Japanese poets have generally found it difficult to write lengthy pieces. The longer the poem, the greater the risk that it will become indistinguishable from prose. Instead, poets have since earliest times preferred shorter poetic forms, usually written in combinations of five- and seven-syllable lines. No one has been able to say with certainty why the five- and seven-syllable line units have been so preferred, although one interesting conjecture is that they are another reflection of the Japanese taste for the asymmetrical.

Precluded by the scope of the *waka* from writing extended narratives or developing complex ideas, poets have concentrated on imagery to elicit direct emotional responses from their audiences. They have also fully exploited the exceptional capacity of the Japanese language for subtle shadings and nuance, and have used certain devices such as the “pivot word” (*kakekotoba*) to enrich the texture of their lines and make possible the expression of double and even triple meanings. Use of the pivot word can be illustrated by the line *Senkata naku*, “There is nothing to be done.” *Naku* renders the phrase negative, but at the same time it has the independent meaning of “to cry.” Thus, an expression of despair may simultaneously convey the idea of weeping.

During the Heian period (794–1185), when poetry became the exclusive property of the courtier class, strict rules were evolved that severely limited the range of poetic topics and the moods under which poets could compose. Poetry was intended to be moving but not overpowering.

By contrast, the *Man'yōshū* contains poems dealing with many of the subjects that later poets came to regard as unfitting or excessively harsh for their elegant poeticizing, such as inconsolable grief upon the death of a loved one, poverty, and stark human suffering. A “long poem” from the anthology expresses one poet’s feelings after the loss of his wife:

Since in Karu lived my wife,
 I wished to be with her to my heart’s content;
 But I could not visit her constantly
 Because of the many watching eyes—
 Men would know of our troth,
 Had I sought her too often.
 So our love remained secret like a rock-pent pool;
 I cherished her in my heart,
 Looking to aftertime when we should be together,
 And lived secure in my trust
 As one riding a great ship.
 Suddenly there came a messenger

Who told me she was dead—
Was gone like a yellow leaf of autumn,
Dead as the day dies with the setting sun,
Lost as the bright moon is lost behind the cloud,
Alas, she is no more, whose soul
Was bent to mine like bending seaweed!

When the word was brought to me
I knew not what to do nor what to say;
But restless at the mere news,
And hoping to heal my grief
Even a thousandth part,
I journeyed to Karu and searched the market place
Where my wife was wont to go!

There I stood and listened
But no voice of her I heard,
Though the birds sang in the Unebi Mountains;
None passed by who even looked like my wife.
I could only call her name and wave my sleeve.⁵

One of the most famous of the *Man'yōshū* poems is the “Dialogue on Poverty,” which begins with these lines:

On the night when the rain beats,
Driven by the wind,
On the night when the snowflakes mingle
With the sleery rain,
I feel so helplessly cold.
I nibble at a lump of salt,
Sip the hot, oft-diluted dregs of sake;
And coughing, snuffling,
And stroking my scanty beard,
I say in my pride,
“There’s none worthy, save I!”
But I shiver still with cold.
I pull up my hempen bedclothes,
Wear what few sleeveless clothes I have,
But cold and bitter is the night!
As for those poorer than myself,
Their parents must be cold and hungry,
Their wives and children beg and cry.
Then, how do you struggle through life?⁶

The poem cited above on the death of a wife is by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (dates unknown), the finest poet represented in the *Man'yōshū* and perhaps the greatest in all Japanese literature. Few details remain about Hitomaro’s life, although it is known that he was of low courtier rank, held some provincial posts, and served as court poet during the late seventh and eighth centuries. The function of court poet in Hito-

maro's time entailed the composition of commemorative poems or encomiums on occasions such as courtly journeys or imperial hunts and of eulogies upon the deaths of members of the imperial family. This use of poetry for the expression of lofty sentiment in response to prominent public events or ceremonies was no doubt influenced by the Chinese practice, but it was not perpetuated in Japan much beyond Hitomaro's time. Japanese poets have always been powerfully drawn to personal lyricism rather than the pronouncement of what may be regarded as more socially elevated, if not precisely moralistic, feelings. The early Japanese language was particularly suited to lyrical expression, and the extent to which Japanese poets went to retain that quality can be seen in how carefully they protected their native poetic vocabulary, consisting mostly of concrete, descriptive terms, from the intrusion of more abstract and complex Chinese loan words. Kakinomoto no Hitomaro was fully capable of writing lyrical poetry, as his deeply felt lament on the death of his wife reveals; but he also composed sustained verse, particularly in the "long poem" form, on topics of public and stately relevance that were not regarded as the proper concern of later poets.

Since it was the *waka* that was to reign supreme in later court poetry, let us examine one of these poems from the *Man'yōshū*:

I will think of you, love,
On evenings when the gray mist
Rises above the rushes
And chill sounds the voice
Of the wild ducks crying.⁷

In this poem, which is attributed to a frontier guard, we find a blending of the two main subjects of *waka*, romantic love and nature. We will observe in the next chapter the important qualities of romantic love as they evolved in the courtier tradition. Let us note here some aspects of the Japanese attitude toward nature.

The Japanese seek beauty in nature not in what is enduring or permanent, but in the fragile, the fleeting, and the perishable. Above all, their feelings about nature have from earliest times been absorbed by the changes brought by the seasons. Of the four seasons, spring and autumn are preferred, the former as a time of celebration of the beginning or renewal of life and the latter as a moment signaling the ultimate perishing of all life and beauty. But, whatever the season, it has been the element of change that has mattered most. A courtier of the fourteenth century expressed this sentiment when he wrote that it is precisely because life and nature are changeable and uncertain that things have the power to move us.⁸

Although the Japanese taste for spring and autumn may at first have been nearly equal, autumn, the season when things perish, possessed an

inherently greater allure; and with the passing years—and especially the arrival in the late twelfth century of the medieval age of fighting and disorder—autumn (and its portent of winter) assumed supremacy. Then, as we shall see, poets and others sought to press their senses “beyond beauty,” and to find aesthetic value in the realm of the lonely, the cold, and the withered.

Underlying the Japanese preference for perishable beauty is an acute sensitivity to the passage of time. Indeed, the “tyranny of time” has been a pervasive theme in literature and the other arts. It is a tribute to the aesthetic and artistic genius of the Japanese that they were ultimately able, as just suggested, to use this theme to extend their tastes beyond the range of conventional beauties to things, such as the withered and worn, that have literally been ravaged by time.

In addition to composing poetry in their own language, the early Japanese also wrote verse in Chinese. The difficulties of writing in a foreign tongue are obviously enormous; yet, Chinese culture was held in the highest esteem by the Japanese, and for a time, especially during the early ninth century, it appeared that the courtiers might cease entirely their literary efforts in the Japanese language and devote themselves exclusively to composition in Chinese. Fortunately for the evolution of a native culture, this did not happen. But Chinese nevertheless continued to hold much attraction for the Japanese, both as a classical language and, in poetry, as a means to express those ideas of a complex or abstract nature for which the *waka* was totally inadequate. The earliest anthology of Chinese poetry by Japanese, the *Kaifūsō* (*Fond Recollections of Poetry*), was compiled in the mid-Nara period, about the same time as the *Man'yōshū*. An example taken from this anthology is the following piece, “Composed at a Party for the Korean Envoy”:

Mountain windows scan the deep valley;
Groves of pine line the evening streams.
We have asked to our feast the distant envoy;
At this table of parting we try the pleasures of poetry.
The crickets are hushed, the cold night wind blows;
Geese fly beneath the clear autumn moon.
We offer this flower-spiced wine in hopes
To beguile the cares of your long return.⁹