

The Composition of the “Plum-blossom Poems” in *Man'yōshū*

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Author's Statement

A word from the poetic anthology *Man'yōshū* (759 CE) was adopted to name a new Japanese era, which means that such a designation stems from grammar books on Japanese classics. To me, this is an unprecedented and epoch-making event. Yet, it has also raised two particular concerns in my mind.

First, we must be aware that the source element for the era name Reiwa comes from the set of poems called *baika* 梅花 (“plum-blossom”), which were the result of an attempt to refinement in the world of Japanese poetry. Concretely, this attempt consisted in including material from elegant poetry into folk songs, and thus drawing near these two genres. However, rather than believing that those poets created a new poetic genre by just copying elements from Chinese poems, we must assume that those poets merged the traditional tree-blossom songs that originated from ancient *kayō* (Japanese songs) with classical Chinese poems.

The second issue is that, in present-day Japan, there is a widely-held assumption that “from the Heian period the most well-loved flower was the cherry blossom, whereas up to the Nara period, it had been the plum blossom”. However, it should be emphasized that the term *ume* (“plum”) is a loan-word borrowed from Chinese, and that the plum tree is a non-native plant species in Japan. No reference to plums can be found on previous texts such as the *Fudoki* 風土記, let alone in the *Kojiki* 古事記 or the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀. Also, references to plums hardly occur in the *Man'yōshū* itself before the event of the second year of Tenpyō 天平 (730 CE). What is more, if we examine the identity of the authors of those poems, we will realize that all of them testify to a strong connection to the clan Ōtomo. As plum blossoms should be considered as a theme almost circumscribed to the Ōtomo poetic circle, it would be fallacious to extrapolate and assert that plum blossoms poems were a favorite genre to all people in the Nara period.

These are my two main concerns about the new era name, and through this paper I will attempt to shed light on both of them.

* This article is a translation of Ōishi Yasuo 大石泰夫, “Ume no hana no uta no seiritsu” 梅の花の歌の成立. *Kokugakuin zasshi* 國學院雜誌 120(10) (2019), pp. 1–13. Translated by Quirós Ignacio.

Introduction

For the first time in Japanese history, a word stemming from the poetic anthology *Man'yōshū* (759 CE) has been adopted to designate a new era. Since the appearance of the name Reiwa 令和, much attention has been devoted to *Man'yōshū*, more concretely to the *baika* 梅花 (“plum-blossom”) poems, source elements for the new era name. Included in the fifth book of the compilation (items 815–846), these poems form a set of 32 items, all of them composed and chanted by the government officials of the Dazaifu 大宰府 province at the occasion of a banquet held at the house of the governor, Ōtomo no Tabito 大伴旅人, on the thirteenth day of first lunar month of the second year of Tenpyō 天平 (February 4th, 730 CE).

Almost no mention to the appreciation of plum blossom can be found in the *Man'yōshū* poems preceding this event. As the poems featuring the subject of plum-blossom represent,¹ with a total of 120 items, the second largest theme in the *Man'yōshū* category of flower poems, the great significance of the Dazaifu banquet as breeding ground for those poems become clear.

The source passage for the era name Reiwa is found in the preface to this set of poems, whose similarities with classic Chinese poem books, such as the *Lán tíng jì* 蘭亭序 (353) by Wáng xī zhī 王羲之, or the *Gui tian fu* 歸田賦 (138) by Zhang Heng 張衡, has been pointed out. The choice of plum blossom as main subject of the Dazaifu poetic gathering is supposed to derive from the influence of Yuefu -style Chinese poems² such as the *mei hua luo* (“The Mume Blossoms”). On the ground of such history of research, Tatsumi Masaaki 辰巳正明 holds that in order to really grasp the significance of this preface, we need to understand that the Dazaifu banquet was as important as those held in the Imperial Court in Nara, where poets and writers used to gather. In brief, it was meant to be an elegant event with a flavor of the capital. The Yuefu-type poem *méi huā luò* puts a lot of stress on homesickness, so it is possible to infer that this was also the underlying theme of the *baika* poems chanted at the poetic gathering of the second year of Tenpyō, as all the government officials were heading to their homeland Nara. According to Tatsumi, up to the Tenpyō era (729–749 CE) the world depicted in elegant poetry had also started to be used as material to folk songs, so the creation of this *baika* poems can be considered a new attempt to refinement, this by means of drawing near these two genres, folk songs, and poetry.

¹ [Translator's note (hereafter, TN)] In this paper, the specific term *baika no uta* 梅花の歌 will be used to designate only the plum-blossom poems read at the house of Ōtomo no Tabito, the governor of Dazaifu, in 730. In contrast, when designating any poem about plum blossom, we will simply refer to it as “plum flower poem” (*ume no hana no uta* 梅の花の歌).

² Chinese poems composed in a folk song style.

Also, among all the “plum-blossom poems”, it is possible to affirm that this set of poems is the first one for which the composition date is known. As Tatsumi appropriately points out, this is the result of a will from the artistic world of the time, which aimed to bring closer poetry and songs by means of transferring poetic material into songs.

However, inasmuch the universe of expressions about “flowers” featured in folk songs was in the roots of those “plum blossom poems”, it is also necessary to look at the latter under the light of traditional expressions used in folk songs.

In this paper, I will attempt to shed light on the expressions featuring the subject of “flowers” in the world of folk songs up to the emergence of the *baika* poems. Then, by means of this approach, I will try to situate the formation of the more general “plum-blossom poems” in the history of expression featured in folk songs.

1. On the “Plum-blossom” Poems

Among the general public, the assumption that “from the Heian period the most well-loved flower was the cherry blossom, whereas up to the Nara period, it had been the plum blossom” has, for some reason, become widely accepted. Perhaps I shall say a brief word on this subject, even if I digress somewhat from the main issue of this paper.

In fact, the *Man'yōshū* features a total of 150 or 160 vegetal species, among which the plum blossom, with 120 poems, is only second to bush clover (*hagi* 萩) in number of instances. Judging only from the figures, it seems that the most well-loved flower for people of that era was the bush clover (140 songs) rather than the plum blossom. In addition to the thirty-two precited *baika* poems chanted at the banquet held at the house of the governor of Dazaifu, four more followed as “sequel poems”, recorded in book 5 of *Man'yōshū* as poems 849–852. Further, in the tenth year of Tenpyō (740 CE), the poet Ōtomo no Fumimochi 大伴書持 presented six compositions known as the “six new poems inspired in the *baika* poetry event at Dazaifu,”³ which are recorded in book 17 of *Man'yōshū* as poems 3901–3906. With these new compositions, the number of poems related to those chanted at the house of the governor Ōtomo no Tabito amounts to forty-two. In other words, one third of the *Man'yōshū* poems about plum blossoms are connected to the *baika* elements chanted at Tabito’s house in the second year of Tenpyō. If we choose to disregard those, the number of poems to be thematically ascribed to plum blossoms is just 84 items in the whole book.

First, it should be emphasized that *ume* (“plum”) is a loan-word borrowed from Chinese, and that the plum tree is a non-native plant species in Japan. No reference to plums can be found on previous texts such as the *Fudoki* 風土記, let alone in the *Kojiki*

³ *Dasai no toki no baikuwa ni tsuiwa suru aratashiki uta rokushu* 太宰の時の梅歌に追和する新しき歌六首. *Man'yōshū*, SNKZ 9, p. 152.

古事記 or the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀. Further, as stated previously, references to plums hardly occur in the *Man'yōshū* itself before the event of the second year of Tenpyō. Here is a succinct list of the occurrences in the different books of *Man'yōshū*: book 1 (five instances), book 4 (three instances), book 5 (thirty-seven instances), book 6 (two instances), book 8 (twenty-one instances), book 10 (thirty-one instances), book 17 (six instances), book 18 (two instances), book 19 (eight instances), book 20 (four instances). It becomes clear that in the books containing the poems from the first and second period of *Man'yōshū*, namely books 1 and 2, no composition about plum blossoms can be found. The same goes for books 11 to 16, which contain a big number of songs written by ordinary people. Therefore, plums may be considered as an elegant figure of speech used by Court officials in their poetry. Apart from the *baika* poems included in book 5, numerous poems about plum blossoms are recorded in books 8 and 10.

Regarding the authorship, if we take aside the unknown ones, these are the poets who have composed more than two poems related to plum blossoms:

- Ōtomo no Yakamochi 大伴家持: eight poems (book 4, poems 786 and 788; book 8, poem 1649; book 18, poem 4134; book 19, poems 4174, 4238 and 4287)
- Ōtomo no Tabito 大伴旅人: seven poems (book 3, poem 453; book 5, poems 822 and 849 to 852; book 8, poem 1640)
- Ōtomo no Fumimochi 大伴書持: six poems (book 17, poems 3901 to 3906)
- Ōtomo no Sakanoue no Iratsume 大伴坂上郎女: three poems (book 8, poems 1445, 1651 and 1656)
- Ōtomo no Surugamaro 大伴駿河麻呂: three poems (book 3, poem 400; book 8, poems 1438 and 1660)
- Ōtomo no Murakami 大伴村上: two poems (book 8, poems 1436 and 1437)
- Ōtomo no Momoyo 大伴百代: two poems (book 3, poem 392; book 5, poem 823)
- Ki no Iratsume 紀女郎: three poems (book 8, poems 1452, 1648 and 1661)
- Fujiwara no Yatsuka 藤原八束: two poems (book 3, poems 398 and 399)

All those poets have the name Ōtomo, except for the last two, Ki no Iratsume and Fujiwara no Yatsuka. However, even these two were closely related to the Ōtomo clan of poets. As book 10, whose authorship is unknown, include 31 poems on plum blossoms, we cannot make a strong assertion, but it can nonetheless be said that plum blossom is a thematic figure typical of the Ōtomo clan.

Broadly speaking, from the Heian period, the cherry blossom emerged as favorite flower expression, but this does not mean that inside the *Man'yōshū* the cherry blossom theme appeared later than the plum's. If the cherry blossom actually replaced the plum as main flower subject with the advent of the Heian period, the reason for this replacement has to be explained. As plum is a subject unrelated to classical Japanese literature, probably the Ōtomo family's initiative of "composing poems with plums as a poetic

figure” was an attempt to incorporate to Japanese poetry the refined style they had learnt from the Chinese poetic world. Seen in this light, it appears clearly that all members of Ōtomo family, starting from Ōtomo no Tabito’s closer ones, had a liking for such a lyrical approach.

2. The Baika Poems Chanted on the Thirteenth Day of the First Lunar Month of the Second Year of Tenpyō.

We can affirm that the *baika* poems chanted on that day opened up a new horizon not only in the frame of *Man'yōshū*, but also in the history of *waka* 和歌 poetry. Although it will become a long citation, I intend first to transcribe here all those *baika* poems along with their respective authors, then analyze their contents. I will start by the preface:⁴

Thirty-two poems on plum blossoms with a preface.

On the thirteenth day of first lunar month of the second year of Tenpyō, we gathered in the house of the old man, the Governor [of Dazaifu], who humbly provided the banquet meeting. At this time it was the beginning of spring, a wonderful month, the weather was fine, and the wind gentle. Plums were opening [their blossoms] like powdered [face of a beauty] before a mirror, and were fragrant like orchid-scented bags behind the belt [of a nobleman]. In addition, clouds were dispersed at the peaks by dawn, and the gauze[-like mist] hanging on pines was inclining [like] a shade. In the evening, the fog covered mountain peaks, and birds being engulfed in the gauze[-like mist] were lost in the forest. In the garden new butterflies were dancing and in the sky wild geese [who came] last [year] were returning [to their nesting place]. And therefore, with sky as a shade [we] sat on the ground with [our] knees close [to each other] and let the wine cup fly [from person to person], ‘forgetting words inside the room.’ [We] opened our collars to the smoke and mist outside. [We] relaxed without any worries, and ‘were merrily content.’ If [it] was not the garden of writing brushes, how could [we] express our feelings? [There were] collections of [Chinese] poems that described the falling plum [blossoms]. What could be the difference between the past and the present? [We] should then compose some short poems glorifying plum blossoms in the garden.

(Preface)

⁴ [TN] To render the contents of this preface and the subsequent poems into English, we will follow the translation provided by Alexander Vovin (see Vovin, *Man'yōshū Book 5*, pp. 55–87). However, for the transcription of the poets’ names, the author opted to follow the *kana* readings used in the collection *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 新編日本古典文学全集 (SNKZ), in which possible titles such as Onmyōji 陰陽師 (probably, “Fortune-teller”) or Shujin 主人 (most probably, “the Host”) are left untranslated. See *Man'yōshū*, SNKZ 7, pp. 40–50.

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When the first lunar month begins, and the spring has come, let [us],
therefore, enjoy the pleasure to the end while picking plum blossoms.

Daini Ki Kyō 大貳紀卿
(Poem 815)

Plum blossoms! I wonder whether [you] would not stay [for me] in the
garden of my house without falling and blooming like now.

Shōni Ono Daibu 少貳小野大夫
(Poem 816)

Did [it] not come to the point that [we] should make [our] wigs out of the
green willows in the garden where the plum blossoms have bloomed?

Shōni Awata Daibu 少貳粟田大夫
(Poem 817)

When spring comes, will [I] spend the spring day looking alone at the plum
blossoms that bloomed first in my house?

Chikuzen no Kami Yamanoue Daibu 筑前守山上大夫
(Poem 818)

The longing in this world is so intense! If it is so [I] would like to become a
plum blossom, but...

Bungo no Kami Ōtomo Daibu 豊後守大伴大夫
(Poem 819)

Plum blossoms are now at their peak. [My] friends who think [in the same
way], let us decorate [ourselves with them]. [They] are now at [their] peak.

Chikugo no Kami Fujii Daibu 筑後守葛井大夫
(Poem 820)

[I] do not mind falling [of] green willow and plum blossoms after [we]
have drunk, breaking [them] off and decorating [ourselves with them].

Kasa no Sami 笠沙弥
(Poem 821)

Plum blossoms are falling in my garden. I wonder [whether it is] snow that
flows down from the eternal and strong heaven.

Shujin 主人
(Poem 822)

Where [will] the falling [of] the plum blossoms [take place]? As if [it] is so,
the snow continues to fall on this Castle mountain.

Daigen Banshi no Momoyo 大監伴氏百代
(Poem 823)

Because the bush warbler regrets that the plum blossoms will fall, [he] sings
in the bamboo grove of my garden!

Shōgen Ashi no Okishima 少監阿氏奥島
(Poem 824)

[I] wish [we] will enjoy ourselves the whole day making the wigs out of the green willow [branches] in the garden where plum blossoms are blooming.

Shōgen Toshi no Momomura 少監土氏百村
(Poem 825)

How would [I] decide [which one is better]: plum blossoms at my home, [or] dropping spring willows?

Daiten Shishi no Ōhara 大典史氏大原
(Poem 826)

When the spring comes, [they] say that the bush warbler, that was hiding in the upper branches of trees, will go to sing in the lower branches of the plum [trees].

Shōten Sanshi no Wakamaro 少典山氏若麻呂
(Poem 827)

Although every person enjoys himself breaking [plum blossoms] and decorating [his hair with them], the plum blossoms are more and more lovely!

Daihanji Tanshi no Maro 大判事丹氏麻呂
(Poem 828)

If the plum blossoms have bloomed and fallen, has [it] not become so that *sakura* blossoms should bloom after?

Kusushi Chōshi no Fukushi 藥師張氏福子
(Poem 829)

Even though years will come and pass for ten thousand generations, plum blossoms would continue to bloom without interruption.

Chikuzen no Suke Sashi no Kobito 筑前介佐氏子首
(Poem 830)

Plum blossoms that have indeed bloomed when the spring came, thinking about you, I cannot sleep at night.

Iki no Kami Hanshi no Yasumaro 壹岐守板氏安麻呂
(Poem 831)

All people who broke off plum blossoms and decorated [with them their hair] must be merry today.

Kamizukasa Kōshi no Inashiki 神司荒氏稻布
(Poem 832)

Every year, when the spring comes, let [us] decorate [our hair] with plum [blossoms] and drink merrily.

Dairyōshi Yashi no Sukunamaro 大令史野氏宿奈麻呂
(Poem 833)

Now it is the peak [of] plum blossoms. It looks like the spring [with] voices of a hundred birds, that [I] missed, [finally] has come.

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Shōryōshi Denshi no Komahito 少令史田氏肥人
(Poem 834)

Plum blossoms that [I] thought I would see when the spring comes – we saw each other at today's celebration!

Kusushi Kōshi no Yoshimichi 藥師高氏義通
(Poem 835)

Although [I] enjoy myself, breaking off plum blossoms and decorated [my hair with them], it turned out that the day when [I] cannot get enough [of them] is today.

Onmyōji Isoshi no Norimaro 陰陽師磯氏法麻呂
(Poem 836)

Plum blossoms are blooming in the garden of my house with a desire to attract a bush warbler who sings in the spring fields!

Sanshi Shiji no Ōmichi 算師志氏大道
(Poem 837)

At the side of a hill where plum blossoms are falling in confusion, a bush warbler sings! The spring is finally here...

Ōsumi no Sakan Kashi no Hachimaro 大隅目榎氏鉢麻呂
(Poem 838)

In spring fields mist rises over, and plum blossoms fall to such an extent that people will perceive them as falling snow.

Chikuzen no Sakan Denshi no Makami 筑前目田氏真上
(Poem 839)

Who made float plum blossoms that I broke off for [my] wig [that is like a wig made of] spring willow on the top of my *sake* cup?

Iki no Sakan Denshi no Ochikata 壱岐目村氏彼方
(Poem 840)

At the same time as [I] hear a bush warbler's singing, [I] see that the plum blossoms in the garden of my house are falling after [they] bloomed.

Tsushima no Sakan Kōshi no Oyu 対馬目高氏老
(Poem 841)

Playing at lower branches of the plum tree in my garden, a bush warbler sings because [he] regrets that plum blossoms will fall!

Satsuma no Sakan Kōshi no Ama 薩摩目高氏海人
(Poem 842)

When [I] see that all people enjoy themselves breaking off plum blossoms and decorating [with them their hair], [I] think of the capital.

Hanishiuji no Mimichi 土師氏御道
(Poem 843)

Oh, plum blossoms falling down in extreme confusion to the extent that [I] see [them] as snow falling on the house of my beloved!

Onouji no Kunikata 小野氏国堅
(Poem 844)

Plum blossoms [for which] the bush warbler could hardly wait, please do not fall for the sake of the girl that [I] love.

Chikuzen no Shō Monshi no Isotari 筑前掾門氏石足
(Poem 845)

Although [I] was wearing [them in my hair] throughout the long spring day, when the mist rises, [I] yearn for the plum blossoms more and more!

Ono no Uji no Tamori 小野氏淡理
(Poem 846)

Two poems about the longing for the capital, not included above.

I am awfully past my prime would [I] be rejuvenated again even if [I] take the heavenly medicine?! [Certainly not!]

(Poem 847)

Rather than taking the heavenly medicine, my ignoble body would have been rejuvenated again if [I] saw the capital.

(Poem 848)

Four poems on plum [blossoms] added afterwards.

I am awfully past my prime would [I] be rejuvenated again even if [I] take the heavenly medicine?! [Certainly not!]

(Poem 849)

Now is the peak [of] plum blossoms that are blooming having robbed snow's color. I want people to look [at them].

(Poem 850)

Plum blossoms that are at full bloom at my home will fall soon. I want people to look at [them].

(Poem 851)

Plum blossoms told [me] in [my] dream: “We think that [we] are elegant blossoms. Please let [us] float in the rice wine [cup].”

Another version says [instead of “We think that [we] are elegant blossoms”]: “do not let us fall in vain”.

(Poem 852)

First, let us turn to the preface, which ends with the passage: “[There were] collections of [Chinese] poems that described the falling plum [blossoms]. What could be the difference between the past and the present? [We] should then compose some short poems glorifying plum blossoms in the garden.” Here we see that the guests of the banquet intended to compose some poems by imitating Chinese poetry on plum

blossoms, and then read them to glorify the blossoms in the garden of Ōtomo no Tabito. As I stated at the beginning of this work, it is possible to accept that this preface is influenced by the Yuefu 樂府-style Chinese poems such as the *mei hua luo* 梅花落, even though there is not any direct reference in the preface to the contents of that classic.

In order to facilitate the analysis, I am going to list up some particular expressions appearing in the precited poems.

(1) Garden plum [blossoms] (*en no ume* 園の梅): It is natural that the expression “glorify the plum blossoms in the garden” appears in the precited poems, but other possibilities exist apart from the word “garden”. This last word is included in seven poems, the word “dwelling” (*yado*) in four of them, and the word “house” (*ie* 家) in one. Although I will deal with other texts later in detail, I am already giving an overview here about the subject of “tree blossoms” in the *kayō*-type poems in the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and in other poems of *Man'yōshū*. In those texts, the tree blossoms are almost always contemplated from afar, as those in the mountains. In this sense, the contemplation of tree blossoms at close range, even within hand reach, as when those trees are in a garden, in a dwelling or in a house is a peculiarity of the *baika* poems that needs to be mentioned.

(2) Willow tree (*yanagi* 柳), nightingale (*uguisu* 鶯), and snow (*yuki* 雪): In his analysis of the scenery arrangement described in the corpus of *baika* poems, Tatsumi Masaaki holds that “plum blossoms, willow trees, snow, nightingales and others are important scenery elements in poetry. Since many of these poems include a combination of those elements, it is obvious that the persons present at the [Ōtomo no Tabito’s] banquet were familiar with Chinese poetry and composed their “plum blossom poems” under the influence of such knowledge.”⁵

Concerning the willow tree, it appears in thirty-six poems within the *Man'yōshū*, twelve of which mention it combined to plum blossoms. Five of those twelve poems belong to the *baika* corpus that we are dealing with in this paper. An interesting fact is that willow trees are not mentioned at all within the first four books of the *Man'yōshū*. In other words, this tree was not taken as a poetic subject during the *Man'yōshū*'s first period (up to approx. 672 CE), nor during the second (672-710 CE), a time span covered by the first two books of the compilation. In this respect, willow trees and plum trees share some similar features as a *Man'yōshū* poetic theme: both are absent from books 1, 2, 7, 12, 15, and 16 of the compilation. Except from five occurrences in book 14, the willow tree is a subject as scarce as the plum tree in the first 16 volumes, as it counts only one instance in book 9, one in book 11, and another one in book 13.

In a similar way, the nightingale is mentioned in fifty-one poems of the compilation, thirteen of which includes it in combination with plum blossoms. Seven of those thirteen

⁵ Tatsumi, *Man'yō-shū to chūgoku bungaku*, p. 363.

poems belong to the *baika* corpus. Further, nightingales do not appear in the first four volumes of the *Man'yōshū*, neither in volumes 7, 11, 12, 14, 15 and 16, which are the same in which plum trees are absent. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful that a nightingale sitting on a plum tree was a scene that could actually be seen in ancient Japan.

As for snow, it is a subject brought up in one hundred and fifty-two *Man'yōshū* poems, thirty of which mention it combined to plum blossoms. Six of the latter poems belong to the *baika* corpus. Snow is not cited at all within volumes 11 and 15 of the *Man'yōshū*, but as it appears in all the other volumes, no solid correlation can be pointed out between plum blossoms and snow as poetic subjects, contrarily to the “plum blossoms-willow tree” and “plum blossoms-nightingale” thematic combinations.

All things considered, it is likely that willow trees and nightingales were used as *Man'yōshū* poetic themes in the same period as plum blossoms. Even putting aside the combination with plum blossoms, the former two subjects can be classified individually as pertaining to the same *Man'yōshū* period.

On the other hand, snow appears numerous times in *Man'yōshū*, including poems from the first period. Let us examine some examples, starting by a poem wrote by Emperor Tenmu 天武天皇 in volume one:

A poem composed by the Emperor.

At the peak of Mt. Mimiga in the beautiful Yoshino it snows out of time, [and] it rains incessantly. [I] came [there steadily] along that mountain road, [deep in my] thoughts without missing [any single] road bend like that incessant rain, [or] like that snow [that falls] out of time.⁶

(Poem 25)

Our Lord who rules in peace, prince of the high-shining sun, above the prospering palace, snow comes and goes, dispatched by an immemorial heaven, and like the snow, may your rounds continue, indeed forever.

Envoy:

Nowhere to be seen, what fun of a morning, to dash through madly falling snow.⁷

(Poems 261 and 262)

⁶ Translation by Vovin, *Man'yōshū Book 1*, pp. 85–86. For the original in Japanese, see *Man'yōshū*, SNKZ 6, p. 40.

⁷ Translation by Asuka Historical Museum, asukanet.gr.jp.

Ever since heaven and earth were parted, it has towered lofty, noble, divine,
Mount Fuji in Suruga! When we look up to the plains of heaven, the light of
the sky-traversing sun is shaded, the gleam of the shining moon is not seen,
white clouds dare not cross it, and for ever it snows. We shall tell of it from
mouth to mouth, Oh the lofty mountain of Fuji!

Envoy:

When going forth I look far from the shore of Tago, how white and glittering is
the lofty Peak of Fuji, crowned with snows!⁸

(*Poems 317 and 318*)

Snow, cold and the harshness of winter are the main thematic elements of the above poems. In contrast, in the *baika* poems discussed here, the depiction of snow corresponds, for example, to the remaining white patches typical of the early spring, which disappears soon after plum trees start to blossom. It can also be used as a metaphor based on the resemblance between scattered plum blossoms and falling snow, or simply between white flowers and snow. In those *baika* poems, snow does not have winter landscapes or cold weather as a background; it is just evoked as an aesthetic element. Although the beginning of this idea of “aesthetic snow” cannot be easily located in time, perhaps it would be appropriate to affirm that the composition of the *baika* poems in February 4th of the second year of Tenpyō, marked the achievement of a new and elegant style in Japanese poetry.

3. Genealogy of the Poems about Tree Blossoms

Flowers are widely featured in the *kayō* poems within the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, so it is surely worth examining how are they portrayed in those poems. However, insofar as our research object consists in plum blossoms, only *kayō* poems featuring tree blossoms will be examined here. Let us start by two poems from the *Kojiki*.

Yamashiro river, lined with seedlings, I am sailing upriver! In your shores grows
the bilberry; yes, the *sashibu*. Under the *sashibu* tree, growing above the river,
below it [there is] a sacred true camelia growing, its flowers are shining, its
leaves are broad, as the great lord!⁹

(*Kojiki, kayō poem 57*)

⁸ Translation by Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *The Manyōshū*, pp. 187–88.

⁹ [TN] The part from “Yamashiro” to “*sashibu*” follows the translator’s personal rendition into English. From “under” until the end, it follows the translation of Vovin, *A Descriptive and Comparative Grammar of Western Old Japanese*, vol. 1, p. 256. For the original in Japanese, see *Kojiki*, SNKZ 1, p. 293.

(...) Growing broad-leaved sacred true camelia, its leaves are broad, its flowers are shining. Present the abundant rice wine to the honorable child of the high-shining sun.¹⁰

(*Kojiki, kayō poem 101*)

In these two poems, the emperor is likened to camelia leaves and flowers in order to convey his beauty and vitality. The idea stems in the great growing force that pervades plants, which make them grow leaves and, in the end, flowers. Such force may have been perceived at the time as a magic power possessed by plants, so assigning a similar power to the emperor was a way to praise him.

Ide Itaru 井手至 holds that this perception of plants as objects with an inherent magical power is expressed in some *Man'yōshū* poems such as the following:¹¹

Well is the hill of Mimoro guarded; the staggerbush is in bloom at the foot, camellias are in flower at the top; how beautiful she is, a mountain that would soothe even a crying child!¹²

(*Poem 3222*)

(...) Now that the spring has come, in the Imperial City of Kuni, in great Yamato, which my lord and prince was to rule for a myriad ages, the hills are burthened with blossoms, and the *ayu*¹³ sport in the river-shallows. When thus the city prospers day by day (...) ¹⁴

(*Poem 475*)

(...) The Yoshinu Palace, the high abode of our Sovereign (...). In spring the flowers bend the boughs; with autumn's coming the mist rises and floats over all. (...) ¹⁵

(*Poem 923*)

(...) When [I] go out and look up at Futagami mountain, which is circled by Imizu river, when the spring flowers are at the top of their blooming [and] when autumn leaves take on their colors, is it very awesome because it is the body of the deity? Or is it because of its shape that [I] want to look at [it]? (...) ¹⁶

(*Poem 3985*)

¹⁰ Translation by Vovin, *Ibid.*, p. 256. For the original in Japanese, see *Kojiki*, SNKZ 1, pp. 352–353.

¹¹ Ide, *Yūbunroku (Man'yō-hen 万葉篇)*, vol.1, p. 209.

¹² Translation by Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *The Manyōshū*, p. 302.

¹³ A fresh-water fish (*Plecoglossus altivelis*), several inches long, resembling the brook trout. See *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁴ Translation by Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *The Manyōshū*, p. 132.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁶ Translation by Vovin, *Man'yōshū: Book 17*, p. 141.

(...) [In Naniwa] my Great Lord who has a nature of a deity and about whom it is extremely awesome even to speak about, at the beginning of spring, when [grass and trees] bend [gently in the wind], eight thousand varieties of flowers are beautifully blooming in full color, when [one] looks at mountains, [they] are attractive to look at, when [one] looks at rivers, [they] are bright to look at, and [when the Emperor] sees that it is the time when everything is flourishing, [it] brightens [his heart]. (...) Naniwa palace, where [he] is ruling (...).¹⁷

(*Poem 4360*)

By means of flower metaphors, the above poems praise the country, the capital, or the Court. Those poems chant the flowers in full bloom, and although we cannot deny that the beauty of the blossoms is implicitly conveyed, it is true that no concrete reference or expression related to the beauty or delicacy of flower blossoms can be found in those poems. On this basis, Ide suggests for those poems the presence of a mindset similar to that of the *kayō* poems in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* in which flowers are mentioned. We have seen that in those *kayō* poems, flowers are described as epitomizing life vigor and splendor, as entities possessing a magical force. This perception of flowers, according to Ide, would also be at the root of the expressions of praise appearing in the above *Man'yōshū* poems, which chant the splendor and glory of the country or the capital.¹⁸ Although the composition periods are different for those poems, the fact is that all those expressions of praise fall into the global composition era of the *Man'yōshū*.

Furthermore, if we look to some later poems inspired in the *kayō* songs in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, we will see that they also feature the subject of “flower blossoms in the mountain.” Within the *Man'yōshū*, the first flower that should be mentioned in connection to that subject is the cherry blossom. Even in the case of “flower blossoms on the trees”, the cherry blossom will come next after the plum blossom in number of occurrences, forty-one in the whole compilation.

Among the concrete mountains appearing in the poems about cherry blossoms, we can cite Mt. Kagu 香具山, Mt. Tatsuta 龍田, Mt. Itoka 糸鹿の山, Mt. Takamado 高円山, Mt. Tayuraki 絶等寸の山, Mt. Aho 阿保山, or Mt. Saki 佐紀山. Aside from proper nouns, cherry blossoms also appears in connection with the common noun “mountain” (*yama* 山) or the expression “on the peak” (*mine no ue* 峰の上). The word *yamazakura* 山桜 (“wild cherry tree / blossoms”) also appears in the compilation. Hence the image of cherry blossoms in the mountains was strong in the *Man'yōshū* period. Although there are also three poems where cherry blossoms are connected with the word dwelling (*yado* 宿), which can convey the notions of gardens, houses or doors, it is clear that the cherry

¹⁷ Translation by Vovin, *Man'yōshū*: Book 20, p. 113.

¹⁸ Ide, *Yūbunroku (Man'yō-hen 万葉篇)*, vol.1, p. 209.

blossoms in *Man'yōshū* are mainly related to the idea of “mountain.”

On the other hand, no example of “mountain plum blossoms” can be observed in the *Man'yōshū*. We cited poems 475 (book three), 3985 (book seventeen) and others as examples of the mountain-blossom relationship, but all of them chant the flowers that blossom in the mountain in spring time. One poem written by princess Nukata no Ōkimi 額田王 from the Ōmi Court 近江朝 in the frame of the “spring and fall poem contest”, feature a “flower” blossoming in mountains in spring. This flower corresponds to the one that the deity of the mountains had put in his hair to celebrate spring, which appears in a poem written by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro 柿本人麻呂. Certainly, the common expression to all these poems is simply “flowers” (*hana* 花), but it is reasonable to suppose that, as those flowers are all described as “spring mountain blossom”, they must correspond to cherry blossoms.

As for what kind of poetic expressions are used in those poems about “wild cherry blossoms”, some of them certainly include phrases about spring and the progress of the seasons, but the most important notions can be divided in two main categories: “blossoming” (15 songs out of 41) and “to be scattered” (15 songs out of 41). Let us examine the most representative examples of these two groups:

a) About the notion of “blossoming”:

Leg-drag mountain, if your cherry blossoms just bloomed like this, day
after day, my love might let me be.¹⁹

(Poem 1425)

Over the hilly road along the river, running round the aisles and hills,
but yesterday I crossed it, and only one night I slept there, but the cherry
blossoms on the hills by the current of the falls, were swept down! Until
the day that my Sovereign will see them, oh wind that comes from the
mountains, do not blow! Thus crossing the hills at the shrine that bears the
(God’s) name, let me pray for a favorable wind!²⁰

(Poem 1751)

b) About the notion of “to be scattered”:

The bloom of the cherry at our house: Is it buffeted by violent gusts of
pine-(waiting / longing) wind, so petals fall to the ground?²¹

(Poem 1458)

¹⁹ Translation by Robin D. Gill, *Cherry Blossom Epiphany: The Poetry and Philosophy of a Flowering Tree*, p. 540.

²⁰ Translation by Jan Lodewijk Pierson, *The Manyōsū*, p. 108.

²¹ Translation by Robin D. Gill, *Cherry Blossom Epiphany*, p. 596.

Oh, spring rain! Do not fall so heavily, for [we] have not seen the cherry blossom yet, and it will be regrettable that you make them fall.²²

(Poem 1870)

c) About the combination of “blossoming” and “to be scattered”:

Composed when the courtiers started on a journey down to Naniwa, in spring, in the third month.

On the peak of Ogura above the rapids, in the mountains of Tatsuta, soaring in white clouds, the cherry-trees are in full bloom, every branch bending with loaded blossoms. But the wind is ceaseless as the peak is lofty, and day after day falls the spring rain; the flowers have scattered from the upper sprays. May the blossoms on the lower branches neither fall nor lose their beauty, till you, who journey, grass for pillow, come home again!²³

Envoy:

Seven days will end our journey; Oh Tatsuta, God of the Wind, never scatter the blossoms before thy breath!²⁴

(Poem 1747 and 1748)

When I go crossing Mount Tatsuta (minding white clouds rising), in the twilight, the cherry blossoms above the falls, having bloomed, are scattered now. But those still in bud, will soon be in full bloom. Though during the blossoming of the flowers, here and there they are [still] unseen, please let them not yet be scattered! [For] however it may be, the Royal Progress of my Lord the Sovereign, will now soon take place.²⁵

Envoy:

If I have free time, I shall cross over even when wading [through mountain streams]; even those cherry blossoms on the opposite mountains, how I should like to break them off though!²⁶

(Poem 1749 and 1750)

Cherry blossoms, as soon as they blossom, you see they'll fall, and all whom we see here, now gathering, will scatter.²⁷

(Poem 3129)

²² [TN] Translator's personal rendition, based on the Japanese translation by *Manyōshū*, SNKZ 8, p. 40.

²³ Translation by Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *The Manyōshū*, p. 219.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁵ Translation by Jan Lodewijk Pierson, *The Manyōshū*, p. 106.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁷ Translation by Robin D. Gill, *Cherry Blossom Epiphany*, p. 303.

If we examine the above in detail, we will realize that lyrical expression of flowers blossoming and falling constitutes the main subject of those poems. The poets, rather than just perceiving flowers as an irrelevant aesthetic background, were strongly aware of them as a lyrical object. In that respect, we can say that they managed to express in poetry the deep emotions they experienced when they contemplated cherry flowers in blossom or petals scattered on the ground. In contrast with the “wild mountain blossoms” described some paragraphs above, the cherry blossom poems seem to be rooted in the intense feelings prompted by the sight of blossoming and scattered petals.

In the plum blossom poems, as stated previously, no mention to mountain plum trees can be found in the *Man'yōshū*. Yet the poets' aesthetic perception, as well as the intense emotions triggered in them by the blossoming plum flowers (or their scattered petals), are expressed in a very similar way to the phrasings of the cherry blossom poems in the same compilation. If we reexamine the *baika* poems under this new light, we will be able to pinpoint seven poems mentioning the notion of “blossom”, nine related to “scatter”, and four featuring the combination of both. In other words, twenty poems out of thirty-eight include the notions of “blossom” and “scatter [petals].”

A thorough examination of classical Chinese poetry will yield that very few poems about cherry blossom can be tracked down until the Six Dynasties Period (222–589 CE). Similarly to Japanese poems on cherry trees, graphs that can express “blossom” or “scatter”, such as *fā* 發, *kāi* 開, or *luò* 落, are also included in Chinese poems related to the same subject. However, as I stated in a previous work, not a single example of intense lyrical expression can be pinpointed in those Chinese poems; the cherry trees function just as a background concept meant to convey the beauty of spring.²⁸

At the beginning of this paper, I described the point of view of Tatsumi Masaaki, who held that the *baika* poems chanted at the Dazaifu banquet in the second year of Tenpyō were supposed to derive from the influence of Yuefu -style Chinese poems such as those included in the *mei hua luo*. Since the Yuefu poems put a lot of stress on homesickness, Tatsumi inferred that the Dazaifu *baika* poems featured that notion too, as all the governors gathered there were far away from their respective regions. It was then natural for them to compose poems about the melancholic notion of “scattered petals”, just as the Yuefu-type poems.

It is no less true that, as “flowers growing in a tree”, *Man'yōshū* poets had also a strong perception of the falling and scattering of cherry blossoms, and chanted them in a similar way. Further, those poems certainly derived from traditional *kayō* songs about “mountain flowers” included in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*. Nevertheless, *Man'yōshū* poems about cherry blossoms show a clear evolution both in lyrical expression and aesthetic

²⁸ Ōishi, “Minzoku no sakura to man'yō no sakura to.”

viewpoint, and perhaps this perception might indirectly stem from Chinese poetry. When considering them solely as *Man'yōshū* poems, though, surely it is appropriate to think of them as a vehicle to convey the deep emotions triggered in the poets' minds by the lyrical notions of "blossoming" and "scattering", which were prior to the emergence of the plum-blossom poems.

4. Conclusion

The *Man'yōshū* compilation includes the following two poems:

A poem about cherry blossoms.

For the hairpins in maidens' hair, for the elegant knight's toupee, in every corner of this country over which you reign, my lord, cherry flowers are in full bloom. Oh, how resplendent is their beauty!

Envoy:

Last year's spring I met you and fell in love, and cherry flowers were blossoming, as if to welcome [that feeling]

(Poem 1429 and 1430)

*The two previous poems were chanted by Wakamiya no Ayumaro 若宮年魚麻呂.*²⁹

The above songs chant the beauty of cherry flowers that have blossomed all throughout the country, which is ruled by the emperor. It is possible to think that chanting the blossoms' resplendence was a lyrical means for the poet to praise the country and thus to compose an ode to the emperor. Continuing with the perception of flowers typical to *kayō* songs from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, these two poems describe blossoms as entities possessing a magical force, full of life vigor and splendor. Likewise, this description of flowers is an expressive means for the poet to chant the glory of the country or the emperor. However, compared to the *kayō* songs, these *Man'yōshū* poems have gone a step further in their description of blossoms, for they do not perceive them just as entities possessing a magical force, but also as beautiful objects.

On the ground of the expressions, "last year's spring I met you" and "[the two previous poems] were chanted by Wakamiya no Ayumaro", Sakurai Mitsuru 桜井満 hypothesizes that these poems were chanted at a banquet held by the emperor, and that it was held every year.³⁰ The perspective of chanting at the banquet surely encouraged the poet to develop in his verses an aesthetic description of cherry blossoms.

²⁹ [TN] Translator's personal rendition, based on the Japanese translation by *Man'yōshū*, SNKZ 7, p. 297.

³⁰ Sakurai, *Man'yō no hana: Hana to seikatsu bunka no genten*.

The poetic compilation *Kaifūsō* 懷風藻 (751 CE) originated in the poetry contest banquets held at the court. As shown by the poem that princess Nukata no Ōkimi from the Ōmi Court 近江朝 wrote for the “spring and fall poem contest”, it seems that these banquets had been held from a very early point in time. By composing and competing, the Court poets, writers and authors of that time could learn new ways of lyrical expression, and took Japanese indigenous poetry (*waka*) to a new level.

As I stated above, it is quite likely that *Man'yōshū* poems on plum blossoms —the second flower category in number within the poetic compilation— started with the *baika* poems chanted at the gathering of February 4th of the second year of Tenpyō. As indicated in the short preface to those poems (see above), while emulating the style of the “falling plum blossoms” Chinese poems, the poets at the Dazaifu gathering also merged in their verses expressions from the tree-blossom-type *waka* (Japanese poems), a category of poems whose main representative element is the cherry blossom. In doing so, they pioneered Japanese poetry on plum blossoms.”

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