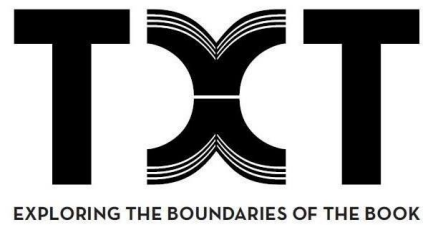


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How Traditional Literature Adapted Itself to Modern Media

Kanshibun in 19th Century Japan

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Japan's modern age is considered to start from 1868, the year in which the Meiji restoration had taken place and the newly established Meiji government had become a political entity in place of the Tokugawa regime.

Many great changes had occurred in various aspects of Japanese society since then, and media was no exception. The first Japanese modern newspaper and magazine were published in 1867. Purchasing and reading these periodicals quickly became a part of people's everyday lives.

On the other hand, things that belong to culture do not change as rapidly as those concerned with politics. In the field of literature, for example, many genres that had been well received in the pre-modern age still hold a significant position until the end of the 19th century. Traditional literature in some ways harmonizing and in some ways clashing with modern media, strives to survive in the new era.

There are many traditional literary genres, one of which is Kanshibun (漢詩文). Kanshibun is a Japanese word meaning "Classical Chinese prose and poetry". Kanshi (漢詩) means "Classical Chinese poetry" and Kanbun (漢文) in most cases refers to Classical Chinese prose.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the meaning of this change of media and its relationship with literature, focusing on one of the significant literary genres in 19th century Japan: Kanshibun.

Kanshibun in Japan before the Modern Age

In pre-19th century East Asia, where China had a strong influence upon its neighbor countries, Classical Chinese was a common language among intellectuals. Not only in China, but also in countries like Korea (Joseon), Japan, and Vietnam, books on various fields such as morals and ethics, history, geography, and science are written in Classical

Chinese. Chinese prose and poetry were written and shared across the border. For example, diplomats from the Joseon Dynasty and scholars in Japan communicated with each other using written Classical Chinese.

The similarity between the role of Kanshibun in East Asia and that of Latin in the Western world is frequently pointed out.¹ This similarity is largely true, though it does require a deeper analysis. Kanshibun and Latin share common characteristics in that both functioned as academic and international literary languages, and both were used as written languages (rather than spoken languages). However, one difference between the two is that Classical Chinese originates from Chinese and has a different grammar than many other East Asian native languages, thus creates an imbalance between countries in its relative ease (or difficulty) of use.

Classical Chinese was known and used by the Japanese people since around the 7th century and its popularity was at its height in the early modern period (Edo period). The infatuation with Chinese culture, as well as the unique procedure called Kundoku used to translate Chinese written literature into Japanese, can be considered as a contributing factor to the popularity of Kanshibun. This situation continued until the latter half of the 19th century, when the modernization of Japan began.

The Decline of Kanshibun in Modern Japan

Similar to the spread of the vernacular and the decline in the usage of Latin in 18th century Europe, Kanshibun lost its popularity in Japan after the Meiji restoration. Newly created modern prose and poetry forms, which were free from archaisms, gradually gained popularity among ordinary people.

The point at which modern poetry overtook Kanshi in popularity could be placed somewhere around 1900. Mori Ogai (森鷗外 1862-1922), one of the most renowned literary people at the time, said in an interview held in 1897 that Kanshi was going to collapse soon, which can be considered as evidence of Kanshi's dismissal from its position as a major literary genre.²

Composing Kanshibun as a hobby continued until the mid-20th century. We know that around 40 Kanshibun books were published per year on average even as late as the 1930's by investigating a Kanshibun book collection curated by Ichikawa Jinzo.³ The popularity of Kanshibun decreased in the modern era, but it was not completely extinguished.

One may recall the remarks on Mori Shunto (森春濤 1819-1889) and Mori Kainan (森槐南 1863-1911), the most influential Kanshi poets in the late 19th century, made by Donald Keene; 'These poets enjoyed fame and even adulation, but the course of Japanese literature moved inexorably in the direction opposite to theirs,'⁴ and it must be noted that while these Kanshi poets had strongly influenced Haiku reformists such as Masaoka Shiki (正岡子規 1867-1902), high-quality, refined Kanshi became less influential for the younger generation.

Though it has ceased to be a part of modern culture, trends in the use of Kanshibun bring us new insights into the relationship between new media and traditional literature.

Kanshibun in Modern Japanese Magazines

Kanshibun still kept a significant position within the society in the late 19th century, with several Kanshibun magazines being published. 1875 saw the first modern Kanshi magazine called Shinbunshi (新文詩), and more than 30 other magazines were published until around 1910.

The Kanshibun featured in these magazines focused on newly introduced ideas and concepts, such as modern culture in an urban environment, rather than traditional themes. This tendency could be understood to be related to the fact that the word Shim-bunshi is a homophone of both ‘new Kanshibun’ and ‘newspaper’ in Japanese.

Works in these magazines were sent in not only by Japanese people, but also by Chinese scholars and journalists, which was quite natural considering the international nature of the genre.

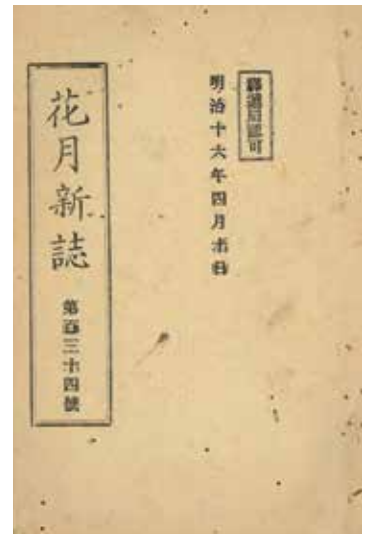
It must be noted that a strong relationship can be observed between the earlier modern Kanshibun magazines with commercial publications of Kanshibun anthologies since the first half of the 19th century. One anthology published in 1848 named Kaei Nijugoka Zekku (嘉永二十五家絶句), was reported to have sold 2,000 copies, bringing a great amount of profit to its publisher.⁵ This example of a traditional genre selling so well indicates that it is not possible to explain the full picture of the development of modern



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



media solely from the viewpoint of Western influence.

The trend in the popularity of Kanshibun magazines can be seen from the statistical data. For example, magazines focused on education had become more popular than those consisting of reader submissions. According to Teruo Inui (乾照夫)'s study,⁶ Kokon Shibun Shokai (古今詩文詳解, Fig.1), which holds more pages for opinion articles and anecdotes, published a far greater number of copies than Kagetsu Shinshi, (花月新誌, Fig.2), a magazine edited by the famous journalist Narushima Ryuhoku (1837-1884) featuring works by contemporary poets and scholars. The decline of the publication of Kagetsu Shinshi over time can also be observed (Fig.3).

	Kagetsu shinshi	Kokon shibun shokai
1881	28,714	120,896
1882	17,819	118,740
1883	14,708	61,302
1884	11,277	124,402

Fig. 3

Another research⁷ shows that Kanshibun magazines remained in print despite a small number of readers. Shin-Shinbunshi (新新文詩, the successor of the first Kanshibun magazine Shinbunshi), and Omu shinshi (鷗夢新誌, a major magazine for the genre in the 1890's), had fewer readers compared with the magazines mentioned above (Fig.4). Both magazines were published monthly, and each volume of these magazines had a readership of about 200 to 450 people; one would imagine that with such a readership, these magazines were not likely to be commercially successful.

	Shin-Shinbunshi	Omu Shinshi
1885	2,572	N/A
1886	5,396	4,079
1887	5,439	3,054
1888	N/A	2,877
1889	N/A	2,459

Fig. 4

Kanshibun Columns in Modern Newspapers

Apart from dedicated magazines, regular newspapers also had a close relationship with Kanshibun. Some of the major early newspapers such as Choya-Shimbun (朝野新聞) and Yubinhochi-Shimbun (郵便報知新聞) in the 1880's, Mainichi-shimbun (毎日新聞), Fig.5, the Kanshi column is marked with a circle), Nippon (日本) in the 1890's, featured Kanshibun columns. In most cases, professional Kanshi poets edited

these columns and made their works public. These columns (featuring Kanshi on a variety of themes) are thought to have been well received to a certain degree by people at that time.

However, the most popular poems were those that illustrated the daily news, which were somewhat different from the normal Kanshi columns. These Kanshi columns dedicated to themes of social events and daily news can be seen in newspapers in the 1890's to 1900's. The poems, which were slightly different from normal Kanshi in that

they used many plain words, appeared in the newspaper several times a week, if not daily, allowing readers to enjoy the poems immediately after the actual event had been reported.⁸

Hyorin (評林, Fig.6) in Nippon was the most well-known column of this kind. Poems in Hyorin were written by Kokubu Seigai (国分青厓 1857-1944), a young prominent Kanshi poet. Seigai criticized Japanese government for its misadministration, attacked politicians' scandals through satire, lamented over natural disasters, and showed compassion to people suffering from them.

Various reasons can be considered for this relationship between Kanshi and current affairs. The satirical effect produced from the juxtaposition of the authority of Kanshi as a traditional literary form with the mundaneness of day-to-day



Fig. 5: *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 19th 1889, page1. This image is reproduced from reprints by the Fuji Shuppan Publisher (不二出版).

events may be one reason for the popularity of Kanshi of this kind.

Japanese native poetry forms are also used for satire, though Kanshi, which could hold more information in one poem, and which had the wide variety of the Chinese vocabulary to choose from when composing, was more suitable for illustrating aspects of a complex modern society.

Kanshibun works written by high-ranking politicians sometimes appeared in the newspapers. For example, Ito Hirobumi (伊藤博文 1841-1909), four times Prime Minister of Japan, was a dedicated amateur Kanshi poet and his poems were often featured in newspapers.



Fig. 6: *Nippon*, May 25th 1896, page 5. This image is reproduced from reprints by Yumani Shobou, Publisher Inc (ゆまに書房).

It is interesting to know that Ito's *Kanshi* were often met with satirical poems in reply, written by *Kanshi* poets and readers. For example, poems that matched the rhyme of Ito's *Kanshi* criticizing his immoral private life appeared in newspapers after Ito composed a textbook-perfect poem celebrating the progress of the country.⁹ There is a tradition in *Kanshi* to produce a poem that matches the rhyme of another poem as a form of greeting or conversation; such a tradition forms a background for such an example.

It might be said that *Kanshibun* adapted itself to the modern media and attained a sophisticated style, though this flourish of *Kanshi* on daily news only lasted for a mere¹⁰ to 20 years, because of the general decline of the popularity of *Kanshibun*, as I explained above.

Conclusion

Though *Kanshibun* did not take a dominant position in literature as a whole, it did manage to go along with the wave of new media, showing an interesting change in relation to media in the modern age. The historical evidence of these changes may give us some suggestions concerning the rapidly changing relationship between literature and media in the present day. ■

Notes:

Names of historical Japanese figures are written family name first, while names of contemporary figures are written given name first by custom.

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1. This kind of opinion can often be seen in previous literature on the subject. The following essay provides a profound analysis on this theme. Richard A.Kunst 'Literary Chinese Viewed in the Light of Literary Latin', <http://www.humancomp.org/ftp/yijing/litchinese_in_light_of_litlatin.html> (30 May, 2014).
2. *Ogai Zenshu* (鷗外全集) vol.38, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1975, p149.
3. *Daito Bunka Daigaku Toshokan Shozo Ichikawa Jinzo Sensei Kizo Toshokan Mokuroku* (大東文化大学図書館所蔵市川任三先生寄贈図書目録—明治以来漢詩文集) or *The Catalogue of donated books from Prof. Ichikawa Jinzo to Daito Bunka University Library: The Kanshibun Books since Meiji Period*, Tokyo : Daito Bunka Daigaku Toshokan, 1992). Ichikawa Jinzo's collection is one of the largest specific collections of Kanshibun books published after the Meiji restoration. Though data from this collection might not be entirely accurate due to possible omissions or imbalances in the collection, it does give us a glimpse into the general tendency of the publication of Kanshibun poetry books. The numbers of Kanshibun publications in the 1930's in the collection are as follows (numbers in parentheses indicate the number of publications for each year): 1930 (49), 1931 (51), 1932 (44), 1933 (60), 1934 (50), 1935 (69), 1936 (50), 1937 (42), 1938 (26), 1939 (35).
4. Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p50.
5. *Oita-ken Sentetsu Soshu* (大分県先哲叢書), Oita-ken Kyoiku linkai, 2014, p424.
6. Teruo Inui, *Narushima Ryuhoku Kenkyu* (成島柳北研究), Tokyo: Perikansha, 2003, p229.
7. An investigation was conducted by the author using the following historical documents referred to in Inui's study above. *Tokyo-fu Tokei-hyo* from 1885 to 1889 (東京府統計書 明治18年-同22年) or *Statistics of Tokyo Prefecture in 1886 and 1887* stored at the National Diet Library.
8. Rintaro Goyama, *Bakumatsu, Meiji ni okeru Nihon Kanshibun no kenkyu* (幕末明治期における日本漢詩文の研究), Osaka: Izumi Shoin, 2014, pp69-79.
9. Ito's poem "My newly-built villa was completed in 29th year of Meiji, and I wrote in calligraphy the three letters "So-ro-kaku" given by Li Shaoquan on its wall. On May 13th, I celebrated the completion of the construction with famous literary men in Tokyo and composed poems. (二十九年大磯別業成, 仍掲李少荃題滄浪閣三字. 其五月十三日, 招邀東京名流, 落之. 有詩)" and the Kanshi in response with matched rhyme found in Nippon and Mainichi-Shimbun in May 1896 is a good example of this. Sorokaku is the name of Ito's villa. Li Shaoquan is the famous Qing dynasty politician Li Hongzhang (李鴻章 1823-1901).