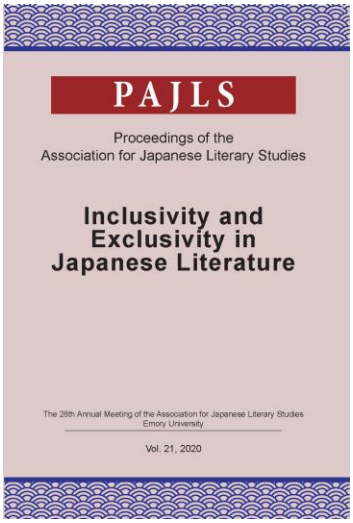
“Poems to Unite and Poems to Divide: What Audience Reactions Reveal About the Social Functions of Heian *Waka*”

Gian Piero Persiani

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 21 (2020): 16–27.



PAJLS 21:
Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Japanese Literature.
Editor: Cheryl Crowley
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

POEMS TO UNITE AND POEMS TO DIVIDE: WHAT AUDIENCE REACTIONS REVEAL ABOUT THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF HEIAN *WAKA*

Gian Piero Persiani[1]
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

This paper is an inquiry into the social roots of *waka*'s popularity. Heian courtiers were passionately, even obsessively interested in *waka*. One need only glance at one of the major works of Heian vernacular literature, from Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* to Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*, to see for oneself the level of interest that this kind of short poetry was able to command among aristocrats. Drawing on an analysis of representations of reactions to poems in a variety of Heian texts, I argue that poetry served two only seemingly contradictory ideological needs: on the one hand, poems provided a potential source of social cohesion to a society almost obsessively concerned with distinctions. On the other hand, poems provided support for the social hierarchy by laying bare differences in level of cultural attainment. Both cohesion and distinction were important to the members of the Heian elite who, while certainly not unhappy with their position of privilege, longed for the solidarity and deep human bonds of the pre-*ritsuryō* community.

This paper did not start life as a paper on inclusion and exclusion, but, more modestly, as a study of representations of reactions to poems in tenth-century vernacular texts (*kanabun*). As I examined these reactions, however, I began to notice patterns in the way Heian-period poetry audiences responded to poems, and came to realize that these patterns have everything to do with dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of admittance into and exclusion from a social group, which was the theme of the Emory conference and is the theme of the present volume of proceedings. To summarize my argument, representations of audience reactions to poems in Heian vernacular texts suggest that poems functioned equally well as a tool to establish and maintain deep and meaningful bonds between individuals despite barriers of various kinds (rank, family, physical distance), and as markers of distinction that reinforced societal divisions by laying bare differences in level of cultural attainment. It should be noted

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1903-8917

that Heian poetry was accessed and consumed in a wide variety of ways and settings, each of which prescribed its own kind of behavior and expectations in the audience. The present paper will only be concerned with what may be called the primary informal reception of poetry, namely the reception of poems in everyday situations by the person or persons to whom they were originally addressed, and will not address the reception of poems in settings such as official court events, or by persons other than their intended primary audience who might have gained access to them sometime after their composition through a variety of both textual (poetry collections, tales) and non-textual (hearsay) channels.

AFFECTIVE AND AESTHETIC REACTIONS TO POEMS IN HEIAN VERNACULAR TEXTS

Unsurprisingly in a society in which people loved to hear or read poems at least as much as they loved to compose them, Heian vernacular texts allot ample space to the reactions of the recipients of poems. In the *Tosa nikki* (Tosa Diary, ca. 935), for example, one comes across passages like the following:

> As the passengers discussed the poem, one person who was listening also made one, but his poem contained thirty-seven syllables. Those present could not help but burst into laughter. The author did not take it well and reproached them bitterly.[2]

In a section of her celebrated *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book, ca. 1001), Sei Shōnagon (966–ca. 1025) describes the reception of one of her poems as follows:

> He teased me saying that he was not going to sully my [splendid] effort with a reply. He then made to leave, saying that he would discuss it with the other courtiers the next time he would be in His Majesty's presence. This seemed odd from someone with a reputation for being extremely fond of poetry. When I told Her Majesty, she was gracious enough to say that he no doubt must have found it truly excellent.[3]

[2] Kikuchi ed., "Tosa nikki," *SNKBZ* 13: 33. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
[3] Matsuo and Nakai eds., *Makura no sōshi*, *SNKBZ* 18: 157.

A particularly rich source of representations of audience reactions are the so-called "poem tales" (*uta-monogatari*). As collections of anecdotes about, or centering on, memorable poems, these works generally pay close attention to the effects that poems had on their recipients, which was no small part of what made them memorable and worth recording in the first place. In terms of historical reliability, these stories range widely from semi-factual recordings of actual exchanges, to significantly manipulated retellings, to outright fiction.[4] However, even the most patently fictional of these anecdotes, insofar as they were written by persons who were intimately familiar with the daily interchange of poems within aristocratic circles, provide insight into the ways in which poetry was used in everyday settings and the various social functions that it served.

Broadly speaking, reactions to poems in poem tales fall into two main categories: affective responses that involve a(n often powerful) discharge of affect in the recipient, and what may be termed "aesthetic" reactions because, in addition to or instead of a purely affective response, they involve some kind of critical assessment of the poem's formal qualities. Starting with affective responses, stories in poem tales often depict recipients in the act of "crying" (*naku*), often "loudly" (*yoyo to naku*), or of "being moved" (*awaregaru*) by a poem. Some examples from the mid-tenth century *Yamato monogatari* (Tales of Yamato, ca. 951):

(Crying)

> Everyone burst into tears and could not compose a reply. (No. 2)
>
> When he read this, he was overcome by sadness and burst into tears. (No. 4)
>
> When he composed this, not a single one of them could craft a response. All they could do was weep loudly together. (No. 41)
>
> When he had this poem sent to her, she read it and without composing a reply, she just sobbed uncontrollably. (No. 57)
>
> Greatly impressed by the poem, the woman wept. (No. 69)

[4] Of the three major extant *uta-monogatari* (*Ise monogatari*, *Yamato monogatari*, and *Heichū monogatari*), the *Yamato monogatari* is generally thought to be the more historically accurate, while the other two are thought to be more heavily fictionalized. See Kudō, "*Yamato monogatari* to *Ise monogatari*: Jijitsu to kyokō no aida de," 256–9.

> That was all it said. Stunned, he turned to the messenger and, with tears streaming down his face, he asked: "How is His Lordship?" (No. 101)
>
> Both the man and his principal wife were so moved that they could not suppress the tears. (No. 141)
>
> The emperor was visibly moved and wept. (No. 146)
>
> They wept loudly (No. 148)[5]

(Being moved)

> The woman was greatly moved by it. (No. 7)
>
> The other disciples who were staying in the same room were moved to no end. (No. 25)
>
> His Majesty the Former Emperor was greatly moved by the poem. (No. 45)
>
> The noblemen were moved to no end, but they had no way of finding out which of the consorts had composed it. (No. 61)
>
> Deeply moved by the poem, he immediately crawled into her room. (No. 83)[6]

Although there may be an element of exaggeration here (after all these are not direct records of personally witnessed events but literary retellings by a later hand), on the whole that audiences would react emotionally to poems that not only were directly addressed to them but referred to matters of immediate interest to them is intuitively plausible and hardly seems to require lengthy explanation. And even if these were indeed heavily romanticized descriptions that bore only the faintest resemblance to actual moments of reception, it would still be worth noting that the discharge of affect is presented as a very common response to a poem.

---

[5] Takahashi, ed., "Yamato monogatari," *SNKBZ* 12: 254, 257, 280, 289, 299, 323, 360, 367, 380.
[6] Ibid., 259, 271, 284, 293, 308.

The verbs that are most frequently used to describe the act of being moved by a poem are *awaregaru* (to be moved or touched by something), *aware to omou* (to find moving), and *aware ni kiku* (to find moving), all of which derive from the same root—*aware*. *Aware*, which depending on grammatical form can be variously translated as "moving" or "pitiful," as "pathos," "emotion," or "compassion," or even simply as "Alas!," describes the affective response to a moving sight and is widely regarded as a central concept in Heian literary thought. Ever since the great Edo-period thinker and scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) put forth his famous thesis that representing *aware* and *mono no aware* ("the world's power to stir the emotions") is the central aim of tale literature (*monogatari*), and of *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, ca. 1008) in particular, however, the notion of *aware* has been primarily discussed within the context, and as a property, of tales. As Norinaga himself realized and frequently noted in his writings, however, tales shared with *waka* the emphasis on *aware*:

> If you want to know the essence [*kokorobae*] of the art of poetry, look carefully at this tale [the *Tale of Genji*]. In the same way, if you want to understand the characteristics [*arisama*] of the art of poetry, look carefully at the characteristics of this tale and you shall comprehend them. There is no art of poetry outside of this tale and there is no *Tale of Genji* outside of the art of poetry. The essences of the art of poetry and of this tale are in every respect identical.… Poetry stems from knowing the world's power to stir the emotions [*mono no aware*] and the world's power to stir the emotions can be realized by reading poetry. The tale [of *Genji*] was written from knowing the world's power to the stir the emotions and many will realize the world's power to stir the emotions by reading this tale. Thus, the essence of poetry and tales is one and the same.[7]

Indeed, for centuries before the *monogatari* developed into a mature written genre, it was *waka* that served and was appreciated as the literary manifestation of *aware*.[8]

---

[7] Ōno, ed., "Shibun yōryō," 99, 100.

[8] Poetry's power to move is famously noted in the *Kokinshū* preface (*SNKBT* 5: 4): "Poetry is what effortlessly stirs Heaven and Earth, wins the sympathy of invisible demons and spirits, softens the relation between man and woman, and soothes the heart of the fiercest warrior."

Poems so effortlessly generated *aware* because they were themselves the product of *aware*. Like the Sinitic conception of poetry to which it owed a great debt, the Heian conception of poetry was overwhelmingly expressive. [9] The famous opening statement of the *Kokin wakashū* (Collection of Yamato Poems Old and New, 905)'s *kana* preface presents poetry as the expression in "words" (*kotoba*) of feelings felt deep within the "heart" (*kokoro*).[10] Another statement made immediately after the first presents the poetic act as a spontaneous and uncontrollable response to external stimuli: "What living creature, upon hearing the warbler sing amidst the blossoms and the frog croak by the water, does not break into song?"[11] Although they locate the source of the poetic act in different loci (the poet's interiority and the external world, respectively), both statements present poetry as the verbal articulation of *kokoro*. The same expressive view of poetry as the verbalization of *kokoro* can also be found in the *Tosa nikki* ("Surely both in the Land of Tang and here, art is what we create when we are unable to bear our feelings"), and in the *Tale of Genji*, where it is applied to fiction: "On the contrary, it happens because the storyteller's own experience of men and things, whether for good or ill—not only what he [sic] has passed through himself, but even events which he has only witnessed or been told of—has moved him to an emotion so passionate that he can no longer keep it shut up in his heart."[12] Indeed, it is often at times of particular emotional intensity that Heian poets broke into song:

(*Ise-shū*)

> The woman was still dejected but, deeply moved [by his poem], she composed.
>
> Deeply moved by the [beauty of the] sacred temple, he composed.[13]

---

[9] On the distinction between mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective theories of literature, see Abrams' classic *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 6–29. On Chinese expressive theories of poetry, see Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 67–78.
[10] "Japanese poetry has its seed in the human heart and flourishes in the myriad leaves of words" (*SNKBT* 5: 4).
[11] Arai and Kojima, eds., *Kokin wakashū*, *SNKBT* 5: 4.
[12] As quoted in Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*, 9; Miner uses here Arthur Waley's translation of the *Tale of Genji*.
[13] Wakashi Kenkyūkai, eds., *Ise-shū* [Collected Poems of Lady Ise], nos. 2 and 8, *Shikashū taisei*, vol. 1, 217.

(*Yamato monogatari*)

> The man was also deeply moved. The poem he sent back was the following.
>
> Overcome by grief, he composed this poem.[14]

Thus, to be moved by a poem was not to conjure up affect out of thin air, but to empathize with the feelings of an other, to partake in someone else's joys and sorrows.

The belief in poetry's power to connect individuals despite barriers of various kinds has been noted by Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen in an insightful discussion of poem-tales. *Waka* poetics, Ramirez-Christensen argues, implied a "utopian vision of perfect communication or communion" with others.[15] Where life often divided, "as a universal expression of the heart-mind, poetry transcended class boundaries, as evident in the absence in it of linguistic markers of social hierarchy required in ordinary language," and "enact[ed] an imaginary dissolution of borders—between the two subjects of a poem exchange."[16] Ramirez-Christensen's assertion is an important one because it underscores a function of *waka* that is seldom noted in modern discussions of Heian poetry: poems provided a source of cohesion to a society almost obsessively concerned with distinctions. In the realm of poetry, where honorifics were not used by convention and the disclosure of heart was expected if not required, Heian aristocrats addressed one another as fellow human beings rather than as individuals of different rank and status.[17] Differences of status could not be magically erased with a poem, to be sure, but the poetry exchange provided a rhetorical space where they could be temporarily bypassed in order to direct the attention to the two parties' interiority and common humanity.

This is not to say that the ideal was always realized in practice. As Tomiko Yoda has pointed out, in Heian-period vernacular writing the utopia of total union through poetry is often shown to be just that, something virtually impossible to achieve in reality.[18] Yoda goes further,

---

[14] Takahashi, ed., "Yamato monogatari," nos. 7 and 156, *SNKBZ* 12: 275, 406.
[15] Ramirez-Christensen, "Self-Representation and the Patriarchy in the Heian Female Memoirs," 78.
[16] Ibid., 50, 78.
[17] Arntzen, "Of Love and Bondage in the *Kagerō Diary*: Michitsuna's Mother and Her Father," 32.
[18] Yoda, "Fractured Dialogues," 526.

arguing that one of the primary aims of longer narrative fiction (*monogatari*) was precisely to dismantle the ideal of perfect communion via poetry. According to Yoda, the poetry exchanges in the *Tale of Genji* consistently stage the failure (rather than the success) of poetic communication between the lovers, thereby sanctioning the impossibility of overcoming societal barriers via poetry.[19] In love especially, the union of the lovers often remained a utopia, which explains why so much Heian romantic literature focuses on the painful by-products of romance (unrequited desire, despair, resentment) rather than on its delights.

Yet, the fantasy of communion through the disclosure and recognition of *kokoro* needed challenging precisely because it was so often championed. If the *Tale of Genji* and other similarly-toned works do seem to stage poetry's failure to bring the lovers together and the emotional costs of such failure, there are plenty of other works in the *monogatari* genre that present the myth of poetic communion in all of its allure. Listed below are the endings of several episodes in the *Yamato monogatari*:

> Such being her reply, His Highness visited her and spent the night even though she was in a forbidden direction. (No. 8)
>
> Upon reading this, the guest was overcome by feelings and rushed to the banquet. (No. 73)
>
> When the boy finished relating the poem to him, the man, who had moved out all of his wife's possessions, immediately moved them back and not only reunited with her but never so much as looked at another woman again. (No. 157)
>
> So deeply moved was the man by her poem that he immediately sent his mistress away and once again lived with his wife. (No. 158)
>
> He felt truly sorry for the woman and, drawing the dish closer to him, ate it with relish. (No. 173)[20]

Depicted here in no uncertain terms is poetry's power to bring people together despite obstacles of various kinds (family, a rival lover, a change of heart, directional taboos, and so on). Upon receiving a poem, the

---

[19] Yoda, "Fractured Dialogues," 526.
[20] Takahashi, ed. "Yamato monogatari," *SNKBZ* 12: 260, 303, 393–4, 395, 420.

recipients are so moved by the author's sincere display of affection that they overcome their initial reservations and take a course of action favorable to them. Thus, if the *Tale of Genji* and other works in a similar vein can be said to challenge the myth of poetic utopia, works such as the *Yamato monogatari* and the *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise, ca. tenth century) rather proclaim it.[21]

AESTHETIC RESPONSES

Not all poems elicited the kind powerful affective responses described above. Not infrequently, reactions to poems involved a critical assessment of the poem's merits and flaws. Consider some examples from the *Tale of Genji*, a work that, although fictional, is a veritable treasure trove of information on how poetry was used and experienced in everyday situations:

> "Still," he thought despondently, "what awful prattle! This must be the best Her Ladyship can do by herself. Jijū must be retouching her poems. And clearly she does not have a trained academician to hold her brush while she writes!" ("Suetsumuhana")

> […] He then composed a poem of his own. "Dear me," she whispered, "Considering his dreadful nature, he cannot be much of a person. And he was so underwhelming in front of His Highness!" Still, since he did not seem to be completely hopeless, she thought she would see how he would reply, so to try him [she composed]. ("Azumaya")[22]

In cases where the skill of the author, rather than their feelings, was under scrutiny, the quality of the calligraphy was at least as important as the poem in determining the reaction of the recipient. Below are more examples from the *Tale of Genji*:

---

[21] Indeed, one could argue that the more realistic strand of Heian vernacular prose, which comprises such works as the *Tale of Genji* and Michitsuna no Haha's (935–995) *Kagerō nikki* (Kagerō Diary, ca. 974), was produced to correct the overly romanticized and optimistic portrayal of poetry-driven romance that is presented in works like the *Ise* and the *Yamato*.

[22] Abe et al., eds., *Genji monogatari*, *SNKBZ* 20: 299; *SNKBZ* 25: 80.

> The way she had taken pains to make her writing nondescript was elegant and intriguing, and he found himself surprisingly charmed. ("Yūgao")
>
> She did her best to hide her awful handwriting, but when he examined it her brushstrokes had no distinction whatsoever. ("Yūgao")
>
> He wrote it in such a deliberately childish manner that one would have doubted it was by the same person. Finding it delightful, her attendants urged her to promptly add it to her calligraphy samples. ("Wakamurasaki")
>
> The purple paper was so old that it had faded to a stale grey. The letters were much too defined, written in an old-fashioned style, with top and bottom neatly aligned. There was nothing worth seeing there, so he put it down without a moment of hesitation. ("Suetsumuhana")[23]

In terms of their role in mediating the relationship between poet and recipient, poems that triggered an aesthetic response may be said to have functioned in very much the opposite way to poems that bound them through the universal language of *kokoro* and *aware*. Because the evaluation of the poem inevitably entailed an evaluation of the author's skill as a poet, which in turn connoted breeding and class, these poems reinforced rather than challenged a hierarchical view of society as a stratified mix of haves and have-nots. Moreover, since the act of criticism is always implicitly also a claim to possess the necessary credentials to pass judgment on the work of others, by evaluating the poem the recipient implicitly placed herself among the haves, while whether the author of the poem gained admittance to this exclusive circle depended on whether their poem passed muster.[24]

In conclusion, representations of reactions to poems in Heian vernacular texts suggest that *waka* poems functioned in two only seemingly contradictory ways: on the one hand, they were appreciated for their capacity to bring individuals closer together through the universal

---

[23] Abe et al., eds., *Genji monogatari*, *SNKBZ* 20: 140, 191, 238, 287.

[24] Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 36: "All critics declare not only their judgement of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it."

language of *kokoro* and *aware*.[25] On the other hand, they provided support for social hierarchy by laying bare differences in breeding and level of cultural attainment. Both cohesion and distinction were important to the members of Heian court society. Like all aristocracies, the Heian nobility saw themselves and aspired to be seen as a cohort of select beings with unique qualities not to be found among "ordinary people" (*tadabito*). Indeed, one might argue that the primary function of "courtly elegance" (*miyabi*) as both a cultural code and as a social praxis was to make visible and readily recognizable class distinctions that might otherwise seem arbitrary or more difficult to accept. Yet, the sources also indicate that Heian-period aristocrats thought it important to balance their position of privilege with a certain universal depth of heart that is embodied in the concepts of *kokoro* and *aware*. Indeed, the "person of feeling" (*kokoro aru hito*) is presented as an ideal in virtually every work of Heian vernacular literature, while the person who lacks it (the *kokoro naki hito*), namely those who are incapable of sympathizing with the plight of others or of feeling sadness before a moving sight, are presented as worthy of contempt even if their social standing is high.[26] Cohesion and distinction, community and privilege, *aware* and *miyabi*: both were important to the members of the Heian aristocracy, and in the fact that *waka* was capable of delivering both in abundance lies the secret, or one of the secrets, of its immense popularity.

WORKS CITED

Abe Akio et al., eds. *Genji monogatari*. *Shin Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vols. 20–25. Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1994–1998.

Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.

Arai Eizō and Kojima Noriyuki, eds. *Kokin wakashū*. *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, Vol. 5. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1989.

Arntzen, Sonja. "Of Love and Bondage in the *Kagerō Diary*: Michitsuna's Mother and Her Father." In *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese*

[25] Starting approximately in the tenth century, the word *kokoro* also began to be used to mean something akin to the modern notion of "taste," namely a special faculty requiring cultivation or special talent. However, this second, more elitist meaning did not displace its original, more universalistic and egalitarian meaning of a basic, universal capacity for emotion and compassion.

[26] See Norinaga's insightful analysis of Murasaki's handling of the person of heart (and without heart) in his *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi* (*The Tale of Genji*: A Small Bejeweled Comb, 1799): Harper and Shirane, eds., *Reading the Tale of Genji*, 455–466.

Literary Women and The Law of the Father, edited by Rebecca L. Copeland and Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, 25–48. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Copeland, Rebecca L. and Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, eds. *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and The Law of the Father*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001.

Harper, Thomas and Haruo Shirane, eds. *Reading the Tale of Genji: Sources From The First Millennium.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Kikuchi Yasuhiko, ed. “Tosa Nikki.” In *Tosa nikki, Kagerō nikki*, edited by Kikuchi Yasuhiko, Kimura Masanori, and Imuta Tsunehisa. *Shin Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vol. 13, 9–80. Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1995.

Kudō Shigenori. “*Yamato monogatari* to *Ise monogatari*: Jijitsu to kyokō no aida de.” In *Heianchō no bungaku to jukyō no bungakukan*. Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 2014.

Liu, James J. Y. *Chinese Theories of Literature*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Matsuo Satoshi, and Kazuko Nakai, eds. *Makura no sōshi*. *Shin Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vol. 18. Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1997.

Miner, Earl Roy. *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968.

Ōno Susumu, ed. “Shibun yōryō.” In *Motoori Norinaga zenshū*, Vol. 4, 3–113. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1969.

Ramirez-Christensen, Esperanza. “Self-Representation and the Patriarchy in the Heian Female Memoirs.” In *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and The Law of the Father*, edited by Rebecca L. Copeland and Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, 49–88. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001.

Takahashi Shōji, ed. “Yamato monogatari.” In *Taketori monogatari*, *Ise monogatari*, *Yamato monogatari*, *Heichū monogatari*, edited by Katagiri Yōichi et al., *Shin Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vol. 12, 247–438. Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1994.

Yoda, Tomiko. “Fractured Dialogues: *Mono no aware* and Poetic Communication in The Tale of Genji.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59: 2 (Dec. 1999): 523–557.