

*Distinguished Female Kanshi Poets Princess Uchiko and HaraSaihin  
— Paternal Influence and Artistic Freedom*

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**Abstract**

Chinese poetry in Japan prospered in the Heian and Edo periods. This paper points out the common characteristics of the two most outstanding female Chinese poets of these periods and elucidates why they are regarded as leading female Chinese poets of their times. Princess Uchiko was the daughter of Emperor Saga (786-842) and was assigned to serve in the Kamo Shrine from the age of four.[1] However, Emperor Saga recognized the talent of Princess Uchiko and told her to "Devote yourself to study." [2] She participated in her father's poetry meetings from an early age and is regarded as the most outstanding female Chinese poet of the Heian period. Hara Saihin (1798-1859) was the daughter of a Confucian scholar and, as her two brothers were sickly, her father wanted Saihin to succeed him. He gave her a farewell poem with the words "You may not return to your hometown without making a name for yourself." [3] She worked hard to fulfill her father's wishes and became an acclaimed female Chinese poet of the Edo period. Why did these two women sacrifice their own lives to fulfill their father's wishes and live lonely lives, and yet both were famous Chinese poets in their lifetimes? It was because their fathers, both outstanding poets, loved poetry and saw poetic talent in their daughters, and thus devoted themselves passionately to their education. Furthermore, in the context of the times, their father's orders were absolute, and they had no choice but to obey them.

Keywords: Female Kanshi Poets, Princess Uchiko, Hara Saihin, Heian, Edo periods

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## Introduction

Japanese envoys to China during the Asuka 飛鳥 period (710-794) brought back a vast amount of Chinese poetry and writing from China. And Japan, which had no written language, copied Chinese characters, learned Chinese classics, and mastered Chinese writing.<sup>1</sup>

In the Heian period (794-1185), Kukai 空海, who had studied in China, became close to Emperor Saga, who was influenced by Kukai's knowledge and the vast amount of books he brought back from China.<sup>2</sup> Saga created an unprecedented boom in Chinese poetry and literature and published the first three imperial anthologies of Chinese poetry, which were continued by the next emperor. This was the beginning of the rise of Chinese poetry in Japan.

The second Chinese poetry boom was in the Edo period (1603-1867), triggered by the opening of the port of Nagasaki, which brought an influx of Chinese books and many opportunities to meet Chinese people.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on the female Chinese poets born during these two periods and discusses how they grew up to become outstanding Chinese poets who left their mark on their times. The poems reveal that the special relationship they had with their fathers made their lives difficult and lonely, but also show that what supported them in their difficult and lonely lives was the responsibility that their fathers handed them. In their poems, we see their daily efforts to fulfill their father's wishes and their honest feelings behind the scenes.

In an age when it was impossible for a daughter to disobey a father's wishes or commands, the poems of these two female Chinese poets, who accepted their father's wishes and devoted their lives to that purpose, reveal the inner lives of these women.

## About Princess Uchiko

Princess Uchiko was born in 807 as the eighth daughter of Emperor Saga (r. 809-823). He ordered her to serve in the Kamo Shrine from the age of four. Uchiko lived there for 21 years.

In the early Heian period of Emperor Saga's reign, Japanese envoys visited Tang-era China and Korea (Baekje/Bokkai 渤海), making Chinese literature indispensable.

Emperor Saga's era is known for its Chinese-style poetry celebrations and a boom in Chinese poetry within the court. Saga was taught Chinese poetry by bureaucrats and monks who had studied in China as envoys to the Tang Dynasty, as well as by naturalized Chinese poets from the Baekje Kingdom. Chinese poetry was required for diplomatic missions, which explains why the Japanese verse of this period was Chinese poetry rather than Japanese waka poetry.

It should be noted here that many women participated in Emperor Saga's court Chinese poetry circle. Their poems can be found in "Bunka Shureishu 文華秀麗集"<sup>4</sup> and "Keikoku Shu 経国集," two of the three so-called imperial anthologies published during the reigns of Emperors Saga and Junna 淳和 (786-840). Many of these women were court ladies in the

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<sup>1</sup> Noriyuki Kojima. *Jodai Nihon Bungaku to Chugoku Bungaku Jyo*. 81-90.

<sup>2</sup> Yoichi Honma, ed., *Nihon Kanshi Kodaihen*. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Kikue Kotani (2017). 37-53

<sup>4</sup> Noriyuki Kojima, ed., *Kaifuso, Bunkasyureisyu, Honchomonzui. (Nihonkotenbungakutaikei 69)*. 237-238.

service of Emperor Saga. The record of women learning difficult Chinese poetry suggests that education was similar for men and women in the Heian period.

Among the women who were members of the court Chinese poetry circle, one whose works have survived prominently is Princess Uchiko of the Imperial Household. Eight of her poems are included in "Keikoku-shu," the third imperial anthology of Chinese poetry. However, since only six of the twenty volumes of the "Keikoku-shu" have survived, it is possible that many more of her works were included. In addition, there is one poem in "Zatugen Howa 雜言奉和"<sup>5</sup> and one poem in "Koden 藁伝"<sup>6</sup>, so the total number of works that can be seen today is ten.

### Poems by Princess Uchiko

It is not known at what age Uchiko began composing poems, but it is known that at the age of seven, she served her father, Emperor Saga, on his excursions, as is shown in King Nakao's poem in the "Bunka Shurei-shu". Although no works of hers remain from this period, her first poem was written when she was around 14 years old. This poem is included in the "Zatsugen howa," a collection of poems composed by five persons, including Princess Uchiko. Her poem is in response to a poem by Emperor Saga about the falling cherry blossoms along the Yodogawa River. The fact that Princess Uchiko was able to compose such a complex poem at the age of only 14 shows her extraordinary talent.

#### 雜言奉和 聖制江上落花詩<sup>7</sup>

本自空伝武陵溪  
地体幽深来者迷  
今見河陽一県花  
花落紛紛接烟霞  
孤嶼芳菲薄晚暉  
夾岸飄飄後前飛  
歷覽江村花猶故  
經過民舍人復稀  
对落花  
落花猶未歇  
桃花李花一段發  
儵忽帶風左右渡  
須臾攀折日將暮  
歷乱香吹雪太目  
湖裏彩浪無数起  
看落花  
落花作雪滿空裡  
空裡飛散投江水  
可憐漁翁花中廻  
可憐水鳥蘆裡哀

<sup>5</sup> Yoichi Honma, ed., *Nihon Kanshi Kodaihen*. 72-77.

<sup>6</sup> Chikara Wakabayashi. *Uchiko naisinno no kanshi*. 90-92.

<sup>7</sup> Kyoko Tokoro. *Literary Works of Princess Uchiko and Her Career*. 179.

唯有釣船鏡中度  
還疑查客與天來

It is interesting to note that the poem begins with an allusion to Tao Yuan-ming's "Tao-Hua-yuan-ji 桃花源記" and links the flowers blooming along the banks of the Yodo 淀 River to the scenery of the Peach Blossom Landscape.

Emperor Saga ruled during the Tang dynasty just after its Golden Tang (Sheng Tang 盛唐) era of Chinese poetry, which strongly influenced literature through the ages in China. In the Tang dynasty, poems were commonly composed at court banquets at the emperor's request, in the favored elegant and gorgeous Shangguan Style 上官體. Court ladies participated in poetry composition on an equal footing with men. Imperial consort Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒, granddaughter of the court poet Shangguan Yi 上官儀 (creator of the Shangguan Style), was the most prolific of these court ladies. She served Empress Wu-Zetian 則天武后, Emperor Gaozong 高宗, and Emperor Zhongzong 中宗, and became highly regarded within the court poetry circles. She had scholars compose poems at court poetry banquets, judged the poems, and sometimes even composed poems in place of those of Emperor Zhongzong, the empress, and the dukes. The fact that it was a woman who was given leadership of the court poetry circles under the rule of Zhongzong, who prioritized literature in his political system, may be due in part to her illustrious ancestry, but it also reflects the Tang dynasty's relatively unprejudiced attitude toward women.<sup>8</sup>

During the reign of Emperor Saga, in turn, court poetry circles flourished. Many members were court ladies composing poetry for the imperial court. Their works are included in the three major imperial anthologies, which was not the case during the reign of other emperors.

We can notice here that the court poetry circles of Emperor Saga's early Heian period and those of the court poetry circles of the Tang dynasty in China during the reign of Zhongzong have much in common. It is not clear whether Emperor Saga learned about the court poetry circles of Zhongzong's reign through literature or directly from envoys to Tang China, but he likely referred to them for his own court poetry circles. The flourishing period of Chinese poetry early in Japan's Heian period (794-1185) came to an end after the death of Emperor Saga.

### **Poems of Uchiko's inner voice**

Most of the existing poems by Princess Uchiko are dedicated to her father, Emperor Saga, but there are a few poems that express her personal feelings. These poems offer a glimpse into the honest feelings of the princess, who lived a solitary life as a bachelor and a priestess throughout her life.

This poem is in response to Emperor Saga's poem titled Jyoya 除夜 (New Year's Eve). It was probably composed on the night of New Year's Eve poetry reading held at the emperor's residence.

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<sup>8</sup> Mutumi Yokota. *Todai Josei shijin kenkyu josetu*. 15-40.

奉和除夜<sup>9</sup> 『経国集』 卷第 13 (Keikoku-shu, Vol. 13)

幽人無事任時運  
不覺蹉跎歲月除  
曉燭半殘星色尽  
寒花独笑雪光餘  
陽林煙暖鳥声出  
陰潤冰消泉響虚  
故匣春衣終夜試  
朝來可見柳條初

I have been living quietly, letting time and fortune take their course, not noticing the passing of the years. The lights still remain, but the starlight has faded. The plum blossoms in the garden are smiling in the cold, and the light from the snow still lingers. The haze of smoke in the sunny forest is warm and birdsong can be heard. The ice in the dark valley has melted, but the sound of the waterfall is only faint. I take out my New Year's outfit, tucked away in an old box, and try it on for the night. In the morning I will see the willow branches sprouting.

The poet may have been invited by Emperor Saga to attend a poetry party on New Year's Eve, but she probably returned to her residence in the Sai-in that night to celebrate the New Year in secret. We can recall the image of Princess Uchiko trying on her New Year's dress, which had been stowed away, all night long. We can feel the loneliness of the young Princess, who had already been replaced at court and would not be invited to the New Year's celebrations.

七言賦 新年雪裡梅花一首<sup>10</sup> (On New Year's day, composing a poem of  
Snow-covered Plum Blossoms 『経国集』 卷第 11 (Keikoku-shu, Vol. 11))

春光初動寒猶緊  
一株梅花雪裡開  
想像宮中嬋娟處  
暗知貴鳥稍相催

Spring light has moved for the first time, but the cold is still severe. As I look at a single plum blossom opening in the snow, I imagine the court ladies in all their splendor. And I secretly think that a bush warbler will soon herald the coming of spring.

This poem is said to have been composed in the 3rd or 4th year of Tencho 天長 (824-834) during the reign of Emperor Junna 淳和, a younger brother of Emperor Saga. At court, Uchiko's half-sister, Princess Shosi (正子) became empress. Princess Uchiko was around 20 years old and welcomed the New Year in a secluded Kamo Shrine. This poem gives us a glimpse into the mind of the young Princess Uchiko, who imagines that her father's younger brother has become the emperor and that the New Year is being celebrated in splendor at the palace.

<sup>9</sup> Chikara Wakabayashi. *Uchiko naisinno no kanshi*. 96-97.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

## Life of Hara Saihin

Hara Saihin was born in 1798, as the daughter of Hara Kosho, a Confucian scholar in the Akizuki domain of Kyushu. Like her elder and younger brothers, she grew up with a Confucian education. During the Edo period, women's education was limited, and marriage was considered a top priority, but what is characteristic of the Edo period is that the father's ideas influenced his daughter's education. Like some other daughters of Confucian scholars, Kamei Shokin 亀井少琴 was also influenced by her Confucian father's ideas, and like other daughters of Confucian scholars, Saihin was forced to learn Chinese studies, poetry, calligraphy, and painting, the three most important subjects considered to be cultivated by women in China. The Akizuki clan in Kyushu was close to Nagasaki and had access to Chinese culture at an early stage. Also, the brothers were sickly. Instead, Saihin was assigned to assist her father at the school as his assistant. The brothers eventually died of illness, and the father, recognizing the talent of Saihin, raised his daughter as his successor. Finally, he sent her to Edo, where he hoped she would make a career as a poet. However, Hara's idea was opposed by his friend Kamei Shoyo 亀井昭陽 and other Confucian scholars, who argued that a daughter is happiest when she is married and that it would be unwise to send her on a journey to Edo alone. Nevertheless, Kosho sent her off to Edo, and in his farewell poem, he wrote, "You may not return to your hometown without making a name for yourself." This verse would define the rest of her life. As her father expected, she lived in Edo for 20 years and worked hard as a Chinese poet, her fame spreading to many parts of the country.

As a young girl, she dreamed of marriage and was even engaged. Her ideal couple was Ekiken Kaibara 貝原益軒, a Confucian scholar from the Kuroda Clan in Kyushu. Since childhood, Saihin had admired Kaibara's wife who assisted her husband in his work. Saihin wished to follow this ideal example of a wife,<sup>11</sup> but her engagement was called off when her father lost his job due to changing ideologies of the clan. This changed the fortune of the Hara family and the destiny of Saihin. Although this was a great tragedy for the Hara family, it gives us the privilege of meeting a rare female Chinese poet, Hara Saihin, and appreciating her legacy of Chinese poetry.

## Poems by Hara Saihin

Hara Saihin's surviving poems number more than 700, and although she probably wrote many more during her 62-year life, many of her poems must have been scattered as she traveled and lived in different places throughout her life.<sup>12</sup> Even so, there are still precious collections of her poems left at her parents' house, including poems from her childhood and a travel diary that she kept in her later years. From these poems, I would like to introduce some that give a glimpse of the conflict between her father's wishes and her own true feelings, and some poems that show her ideal life.

In the Edo period, being a Chinese poet was originally a male occupation. In addition, she was the only woman who taught poetry and Chinese studies in various places to earn a living while traveling. It must not have been easy for her to continue traveling under these circumstances. In one of her poems, she even expresses some weakness.

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<sup>11</sup> Kikue Kotani (2017). 605-608.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 23.

We can read from her works the honest feelings of a woman who lived in opposition to the times.

留別佐野贅山<sup>13</sup> (Farewell poem to Sano Zeizan)  
(excerpt)

三春淚不乾  
除服未多日  
再遊遺言順  
人道非土怨  
人情險山川  
我志已如石  
寧顧行路難  
斯意須緘口  
得失任他觀

The three months of spring never thirsted for tears. It is only a few days since the end of the mourning period, and yet I must once again embark on a journey to follow my father's last will and testament. People say that the hardships of living in another country and the human condition are more difficult than mountains and rivers, but my will is already as firm as a stone, so why should I worry about the severity of the journey? But let me keep my mouth shut for the time being about that determination and leave success and failure to the judgment of others.

Once, on her way to Edo at the urging of her father, Saihin stayed in Kyoto. However, due to her father's illness, she returned to her hometown. Her father later died, and the piece of paper he had sent to her, "You may not return to your hometown without making a name for yourself" became his last will and testament. Therefore, Saihin left for Edo again. The poem above is one she sent to a friend at that time. It describes how she had no time to grieve over her father's death, but instead made a firm resolution to follow her father's last will and testament, as you find in this phrase "My ambition is like a stone."

新年書懷<sup>14</sup> (New Year's Memories)

撞破樓鐘百八聲  
還鄉夢斷已天明  
清晨照影憐多病  
白髮形愁生數莖  
詩興久因醫藥癡  
歸心空逐夕陽傾  
十年孤客遺言在  
豈敢無名入故城

By the time the one hundred and eight bells had finished tolling and the dream of returning home had been severed, dawn had already begun to break. On a clear and sunny morning, I

<sup>13</sup> Kikue Kotani. *Yoka tobu* 楊花飛ぶ. 94-95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-196.

look in the mirror and take pity on my sickly body. A few gray hairs are intermingled, reflecting my sadness. My desire to write poetry has also been diminished by the medication. The desire to return to my hometown grows as I follow the setting sun. I have been traveling alone for ten years because of my father's will. How can I return home without success?

This poem expresses her thoughts on the New Year while suffering from beriberi, having lived in Edo for ten years fulfilling her father's last will and testament. Her longing for her hometown is also growing stronger. She is feeling a sense of urgency and pressure to gain fame, even though it is hard enough for a single woman to make a living as a Chinese poet. However, as the New Year approaches, she renews her commitment to her father's will and expresses her desire to do her best.

謝化蝶道人 (Thanks for Kacho Dojin)

脚底無繩安有家  
思人須讀是南華  
他生願作双飛蝶  
遊戲莊周園裏花

There is no rope at my feet, where will be my home to return to? The book we should read when we think of others is "Zhuangzi".<sup>15</sup> If I were born again, I would like to be a pair of butterflies. I wish I could play with Zhuang Zhou in the flower garden.

This poem was written early in her life in Edo when she fell in love with a married man and sent this poem to him. She expresses her gratitude for the "Zhuangzi" that she borrowed from him. She also expresses her wish that if she were reborn, she would like to be a "double-flying butterfly" with Zhuangzi, playing with flowers in the flower garden. Although she has remained celibate to fulfill her father's wishes, she has always had the desire to love and marry if possible.

松隱翁に次韻す (Responding to Old Master Shoin)  
(excerpt)

任重三千道杳然  
人言遠覓伯鸞賢  
月中折桂知何日  
自笑無階欲上天

The responsibility is heavy, and the road is far. People say that I must be looking for a wise husband like 伯鸞 (luan)<sup>16</sup> in former times. When will I succeed? But she scoffs at herself for hoping to ascend to heaven when there is no stairway.

This poem was written when she visited her father's friend Shoin Marukawa 丸川松隱 on her way to Edo while traveling to visit her father's friends and acquaintances. Shoin admonished Saihin for allowing a woman to continue traveling alone and suggested that she get married

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Zhuang Zhou* (莊子).

<sup>16</sup> Character of Liang Hong in the Later Han Dynasty.

and join a family. To this, Saihin replied that it was fine to have at least one such woman, but not two.

扁舟從此去<sup>17</sup>  
千里向天涯  
墨和双行淚  
親緘寄阿誰

The little boat leaves here and heads for a faraway land. Two tears fall and mix with the black ink, and with all my heart, I close the seal and wonder to whom I am going to give it.

This poem expresses the sadness of parting with someone she met in Shimonoseki 下関 on her way to Edo (present-day Tokyo). She writes the letter in tears, but the text conveys the mind of a 30-year-old woman wondering whether she should really give the letter to him.

三千屈指豫期程<sup>18</sup>

幾歲琴書尋舊盟  
數脚胡牀移水面  
一樽村酒有風情  
絳河星少懸明月  
傑嶂秋高佳夕晴  
看取此行吾有誓  
無名豈敢入山城

I have counted my fingers many times and set a schedule for this trip. Over the years I plan to visit old friends with my Koto 琴 and calligraphy. How elegant it would be to move a few chairs to the water and share a barrel of sake. The Milky Way is starless, and the moon is clear. The high peaks have a hint of autumn in the air, and the evening view is wonderful. Please understand that I have made a commitment to you on this trip. I will not return to my hometown until I succeed.

This poem was composed on her way to Edo, after visiting her brothers and disciples, and on her parting. To ease the pain of leaving her hometown and siblings and heading to Edo alone, she seems to be reminding herself of the purpose of her journey by reaffirming her father's last words in her heart.

安政戊午春王正月元旦次韻澤村詩盟<sup>19</sup> (New Year's Day in the 4th year of Ansei, responding to Sawamura Shimei)

兩度春風兩處年  
迎新送旧各陶然  
單身不結鴛鴦夢  
淡淡生涯地上仙

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<sup>17</sup> Kikue Kotani. (2018). 108-109.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 101-103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 293-294.

A year of experiencing two spring winds and staying in two places. Sending the old and welcoming the new year, everyone is pleasantly drunk and enraptured. I have never married, and I have lived a modest life like an earthly hermit.

Saihin spent New Year's Day in the 4th year of Ansei (1857) at the home of a traveling friend. Here, too, she expresses her thoughts on the New Year, speaking matter-of-factly about her own circumstances at the age of 61, having never married.

The poem below was discovered among the belongings of the deceased after her death. Still traveling at the age of 62 she decided to go back to Edo to fulfill her long-cherished wish to publish a collection of her father's poems. Her friends, concerned about her age, objected to her decision, but she was determined to fulfill her duty, and her poems are imbued with a tragic determination to do so.

### 孤負<sup>20</sup> (Disobeyal)

孤負恩師與父兄  
雲栖水宿不留行  
但吾縱作山阿骨  
不許無名入故城

Still not fulfilling the wishes of my mentor and parents. I continue my journey without staying in one place, leaving the world behind me. Even though I may have to bury my bones in the mountains and rivers, I have never forgotten the words of my father's will: "You may not return to your hometown without making a name for yourself."

### Similarities

As we have seen above, there are some similarities between the lives of Princess Uchiko, and Hara Saihin.

1. Born with a wealth of talent.
2. Father recognizes their talent.
3. Entrusted with father's hopes.
4. Could not disobey father's wishes even if they wished to do so.
5. Could not marry and lived a solitary life.
6. As a result, the poems of these women are littered with sadness and loneliness.
7. This emotional content, however, brought them acclaim in their respective eras.

### Conclusion

The lives of these two female Chinese poets reflect an arrangement between father and daughter that we cannot imagine today. However, this may have been taken very much as a matter of course by the women of the time. According to Confucianism, the father's orders were absolute. Both Uchiko and Saihin had no choice but to keep their desires to themselves and choose the life their father wanted for them. For women of their age, these circumstances were severe. The two women wrote poems about their endurance in the face of adversity.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 317-318.

In the Heian period (794-1185), Sinitic poetry gradually lost popularity with the death of Emperor Saga. It was replaced by the rise of kana (Japanese syllabary) literature, so the activities of female Chinese poets are not often mentioned in literary history.

In the Edo period (1603-1868), the opening of the port of Nagasaki triggered an unprecedented boom in Chinese poetry and there were quite a few female Chinese poets and their works. It is often thought that female Chinese poets became known only in the Edo period. But this overlooks the period of Emperor Saga in the early Heian period which established Chinese poetry and literature in Japan.

Based on the philosophy that literature was indispensable for the management of the nation, Emperor Saga ordered the compilation of three imperial anthologies, which led to the rise of literary culture. The literary world was formed around the emperor, and court women participated in it, leading to the birth of Japan's first known female Chinese poets, such as Princess Uchiko. Thereafter, women specialized in kana verse, and Chinese poetry did not provide opportunities for women again until the Edo period.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Endnotes

- [1] Oosone Shosuke. *Heiansyoki no Joryu kansijin Nihon Joryu Bungakushi*, 118.
- [2] Chikara Wakabayashi. *Uchiko naisinno no kanshi*. Tokyo Seitoku Kokubun, 26, 91.
- [3] Kikue Kotani.(2017). *Hara Sahin Shi to Shogai*,178.

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