

PLANTS
IN
EARLY
JAPANESE
POETRY



No matter what the motive — religious, horticultural or artistic — the Japanese have always treated plants with a special reverence. An intense appreciation of plants is evident in the magnificent Japanese gardens, Shinto shrines, paintings, and especially in Japanese poetry. From the earliest Japanese writings to the present day, in fact, plants are the most dominant single motif in all of Japanese poetry. To appreciate the remarkable continuity of this traditional subject, it is valuable to look at plants as they first appeared in Japanese literature. The two oldest extant Japanese books, the *Kojiki* and the *Manyoshu*, can tell us a great deal about the early attitudes towards, and uses of, certain plants.

The *Kojiki*, completed around 720 A.D., is Japan's earliest "Record of Ancient Matters." It is a compilation of myths, legends and songs as well as an "official" genealogy which established exactly who was related to the Emperor for the purpose of providing correct favors from the throne. The *Manyoshu*, completed about 780 A.D., only sixty years after the *Kojiki*, is Japan's earliest anthology of purely Japanese poetry. Both books contain court poetry as well as poetry and songs that obviously have a humble origin.

Plants are referred to in three important ways in these books: first, as useful objects in eighth century culture in Japan; second, as analogies to describe human feelings or beauty; and third, as a source of comfort and wisdom.

*Useful plants.**

Aside from providing food, plants also supplied eighth century Japan with a wide variety of useful items. Cryptomerias were used for building boats (*Kojiki* II: 102: 5). Countryfolk used the thick leaves of the evergreen *Castanopsis cuspidata* as "bowls" for rice (*Manyoshu* II: 141-2). A very large oak, *Quercus acutissima*, provided elegant leaves which were used

* Japanese, Latin, and English names are identified in a list at the end of this paper.

as cups at banquets (*Kojiki* II: 102: 5). The cups from the acorns of this same oak provided a greyish dye for clothing (*Manyoshu* MXVIII: 4106–9). Another dye was obtained from the juice of the atane plant (*Kojiki* 27: 21–25). Several textiles were woven from plant fibres. For instance:

Under silken curtains,
The fluffy ones,
Under covers of MUSI fibres,
The soft ones,
Under cover of TAKU fibres,
The rustling ones,
You will embrace
With your arms
White as a rope of TAKU fibres.

(*Kojiki* 28: 19–29)

Taku refers to the fibres made from the tree popularly known as the paper mulberry, *Broussonetia papyrifera*, which is not a mulberry but is in the mulberry family, and has had a long history of material use for humans. In ancient times a particularly strong paper made from its bark was used for deeds in China; in modern times it is used for stencils because of its capacity for holding the necessary wax material. Strong, thin, and flexible rope and textile fibres can also be made from the bark. *Taku* fibres are still used as comfortably warm and flexibly sturdy lining material for silk, hence making it possible to wear quite delicate-looking silks in the worst of winters. The paper mulberry, however, is not particularly attractive and has an aggressive growth habit. The Japanese consider it a rather unaesthetic weed. Hence, though they might use its bark for strong white paper to write a poem to a pine or cherry tree, the paper mulberry itself has probably never been considered the subject for such a poem, much less a plant for anyone's garden. Its usefulness is its only merit.

Plants used as analogies to describe human feelings or beauty. Most of the poetic similes and metaphors that appear in the *Kojiki* and *Manyoshu* are related to specific plants. For example:

Her teeth were white
Like SIPI acorns, like water-chestnuts.

(*Kojiki* II: 101: 32, 33)

Or, in reference to the “pepper plant”:

Beneath the fence
Grows a pepper plant.
It burns the mouth;
Like this sting, I will not forget,
But will smite them relentlessly!

(*Kojiki* II: 52: 32–38)

And again, in reference to this period’s ideally docile wife:

Your head drooping,
Like the lone reed of Susuki grass
On the mountainside.

(*Kojiki* I: 27: 39–41)

The conventional Japanese epithet for the young wife is, in fact, that she is “like the young grass” (*Kojiki* I: 27: 46, 47). The susuki grass, or *Miscanthus sinensis*, is an autumnal flower that grows profusely on the mountainsides in the warmer regions of Japan. Like the ideal Japanese wife of this period, the susuki is not particularly elegant, but is very graceful when it flowers and “droops” itself on the mountainsides. Willow trees and bamboo stems also have a pliant gracefulness which can be used in poetry to describe the ideal wife:

Beauty was hers that glowed like autumn
mountains
And grace as of the swaying bamboo stem.

(*Manyoshu* II: 217–9)

The ideal concubine, on the other hand, is described in terms of the tatibana (wild orange) tree:

Its upper branches
Are withered by the birds’ nesting;
Its lower branches
Are withered by the people’s plucking
But the three-chestnut
Middle branches
Like these best branches
Is the ruddy maiden . . .

(*Kojiki* II: 102: 6–19)

Often certain plant images are used to glorify the Emperor. For instance, when a mistress of the court is about to be executed for having let a leaf fall into a cup being presented to the Emperor, she saves herself by comparing the grandeur of the tall



Albizia julibrissin. Photo: P. Bruns.

elm tree with the stature and divine generosity of the Emperor:

Its upper branches
Spread out over the heavens:
Its middle branches
Spread out over the eastern lands:
Its lower branches
Spread out over the rural regions.
The leaves at the tip
Of the upper branches;
Touch down
On the middle branches;
The leaves at the tip
Of the middle branches
Touch down
On the lower branches;
Drop, as floating oil
Into the beautiful jeweled cup
Presented
By the girl of Mipe.

(*Kojiki* III: 133: 35–54)

Plants as a source of comfort and wisdom

Nature is never seen as a threatening or malicious force in the *Kojiki* and the *Manyoshu*. Plants are treated with a sense of affinity and awe. In both the *Kojiki* and the *Manyoshu*, for instance, we find poems addressed directly to solitary pine trees. A young hero in the *Kojiki* is on his way to a decisive encounter with a great white boar; he sings, perhaps wistfully, for he will need help of some kind in this endeavor:

O lone pine,
Were you a man,
I would give you a sword to wear,
I would dress you with clothes,
O lone pine
—O my brother!

(*Kojiki* II: 86: 13–23)

This sense of kinship with the pine tree grows into veneration in the *Manyoshu*. A certain prince admires the age and constancy of the evergreen:

O solitary pine, how many
Generations of man have you known?
Is it because of your great age
That the passing winds sing in so clear a tone?

(*Manyoshu* VI: 1042)

Veneration for an aging parent is often expressed through images related to the longevity of the conifers:

Flourish, my noble mother
Like the pines and junipers.

(*Manyoshu* XIX: 4169–70)

About the most treacherous natural event in the *Manyoshu* is when the autumn leaves, which are nonetheless flying about magnificently (*Manyoshu* II: 135–7), prevent the poet from seeing his wife's home. The events most often remembered by a surviving spouse are the moments shared with nature, when they went to look at the elm trees in autumn (*Manyoshu* II: 210–2) or were "Bedecked with flowers in spring" (*Manyoshu* II: 196–8). A dead husband or wife may be remembered by certain flowers in a garden:

The fringed pink in my garden
Which my beloved planted
For her remembrance in autumn-tide
Has all come out in bloom.

(*Manyoshu* III: 464)

It is significant that plantlife is seen, without exception, as a constant source of comfort and concern.

When so little of his life remained,
 He asked, 'Are the bush-clovers
 Yet in flower?' — Alas, my master!
 (*Manyoshu* III: 455)

Certain plants take on symbolic meanings which need only be mentioned in the poetry in order to conjure up specific associations. For instance, a Lady writes to her lover:

The silk-tree that blooms in daytime
 And sleeps the love-sleep at night,
 Your lady should not see alone.
 Look well on this, my slave!
 (*Manyoshu* VIII: 140-1)

This silk-tree is the highly treasured *Albizia julibrissin*. It is a graceful tree, whose twice-compound leaves grow in such a way that there is never an odd number of leaflets on any rachis. As the poem states, the tree blooms in the daytime; at night the leaves fold up, two by two, signifying couples sleeping together.

Each season brings the delights of new sensations which are linked with certain plants. Early spring is celebrated with poems welcoming the plum blossom. The plum tree's rough, rugged trunk and angular branches have blossoms that look strikingly fragile in comparison, especially since they often bloom while snow is still on the ground.

When with the first month comes the spring,
 Thus breaking sprays of plum-blossoms,
 We'll taste pleasure to the full.
 (*Manyoshu* V: 815)

The luscious and thick-smelling cherry blossoms appear later in the spring. Cherries are dazzling when in bloom, but the flowers fall quickly; hence the Japanese poems about cherry trees often express a certain melancholy.

I thought I would wear it
 When the spring came —
 Alas, my 'cherry flower'
 Is fallen and gone!
 (*Manyoshu* XVI: 3786-7)

The apotheosis of plant appreciation is the following poem about autumn from the *Manyōshū*:

The flowers that blow
In the autumn field
When I count them on my fingers,
There they are —
The flowers of seven kinds.

The 'tail flowers,' the flowers
Of the kuzu vine and patrinia,
The fringed pink, and the agrimony,
And last the blithe 'morning face.'

(*Manyōshū* VIII: 1537-8)

The 'tail flower' is the *Miscanthus sinensis*; its color is generally yellow, with some white and purple. The Kuzu vine, or *Pueraria lobata*, is a creeping vine with reddish-purple flowers. *Patrinia scabiosaefolia* is a yellow wildflower, often as tall as three to four feet. The 'hemp agrimony,' or *Eupatorium chinense* var. *simplicifolium*, is a member of the chrysanthemum family, though its flowers are generally smaller than the normal chrysanthemum. It has a particularly strong, pungent odor, often used for rich perfumes. By simply listing certain plants the poet has created for the Japanese reader many sights, smells and connotations related to autumn.

The *Kojiki* and *Manyōshū* mark the beginning of a long poetic tradition which focussed its thoughts and feelings on plantlife and the changing of the seasons. This tradition is not confined to poetry, though Japan's poetry developed a few centuries before her painting. In this tradition we see the Japanese poet at one with his natural environment and with the plants that grow in it.

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JAPANESE, LATIN, AND ENGLISH NAMES OF PLANTS IN EARLY JAPANESE POETRY

- Cryptomerias — *Cryptomeria japonica* (L.F.) D. Don = Sugi.
Castanopsis cuspidata (Thunberg) Schottky = Tsubura-jii
Quercus acutissima Carruthers = Kashiwa
 Atane — *Rubia cordifolia* L. var. *munjista* Miq. = akane
 Musi — = mushi = *Boehmeria nivea* Gaudichaud = Ramie
 Taku — *Broussonetia papyrifera* (L.) Vent.
 Pine — = matsu
 Cherry — = sakura
 Sipi — = shii = Mateba-shii = *Pasania edulis* Makino or
 Tsubura-jii = *Castanopsis cuspidata* (Thunberg) Schottky
 Water-chestnut — = Hishi = *Trapa japonica* Flerov. or = shiro-
 guwai = *Eleocharis dulcis* (Burman f.) Trin.
 Pepper plant — = hajinami = Asakuran zansho = *Zanthoxylum*
piperatum DC. forma *inerme* (Makino) Makino
 Susuki grass — *Miscanthus sinensis* Anderss.
 Tatibana — = Tachibana = *Citrus tachibana* (Makino) T.
 Tanaka
 Three-chestnut — = mitsu-gure probably = Kuri = *Castanea*
crenata Sieb. and Zucc.
 Fringed pink — = nadeshiko = *Dianthus superbus* L.
 Bush-clover — *Lespedeza* spp. = hagi

Silk tree — *Albizia julibrissin* Durazz. = Nemu-no-ki

Plum tree — = ume = *Prunus mume* Sieb. & Zucc.

Morning face — = asagao = *Ipomoea nil* L.

Tail flower — = susuki = *Miscanthus sinensis* Anderss.

Kuzu — = Kudzu = *Pueraria lobata* (Willd.) Ohwi

Patrinia — = Omina-eshi = *Patrinia scabiosaefolia* Fisch.

Agrimony — = Hiyodoribana = *Eupatorium chinense* L. var. *simplicifolium* (Makino) Kitam.

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The art of dwarfing trees, as commonly practised both in China and Japan, is in reality very simple and easily understood. It is based upon one of the commonest principles of vegetable physiology. Anything which has a tendency to check or retard the flow of the sap in trees, also prevents, to a certain extent, the formation of wood and leaves. This may be done by grafting, by confining the roots in a small space, by withholding water, by bending the branches, and in a hundred other ways, which all proceed upon the same principle. This principle is perfectly understood by the Japanese, and they take advantage of it to make nature subservient to this particular whim of theirs. — *Robert Fortune in "Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China."* V. 2. 1847.