The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess

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PROLOGUE
This is a study of ways of reading some Japanese poems (waka) written by the woman known as “the Imperial Princess Senshi” (Senshi Naishinnō) or as “the Great Kamo Priestess Senshi” (Daisaiin Senshi, or simply Daisaiin). She was born in 964 and died in 1035, in the Heian period of Japanese history (794–1185). Most of the poems discussed here are what may loosely be called Buddhist poems, since they deal with Buddhist scriptures, practices, and ideas. For this reason, most of them have been treated as examples of a category or subgenre of waka called Shakkyōka, “Buddhist poems,” or more literally, “poems on, about, or relating to the teachings and practices of Buddhism.” In this term, Shakkyō means “Buddha’s (i.e., Śakyamuni’s) teachings,” although the teachings referred to are by no means limited to those of the “historical Buddha,” and ka means poem here as it does in waka, a Sino-Japanese word for “Japanese poem” as distinguished from shi or kanshi, “Chinese poem.”

The very use of the term “Buddhist poems,” Shakkyōka, in reference to Senshi’s poems suggests a certain way of reading those poems. But one of the things this study will show is that such a reading, if too encumbered by notions about that classification or genre, may mask the very important fact that most of her poems (and many others so classified) are really more like other poems in the waka canon than they are unlike them. In the case of Senshi’s “Buddhist poems,” especially the ones examined closely here, the links, through language, to the traditions of secular verse are explicit, and are very much in keeping with the expressed purpose of her project, which was to use the essentially secular and public literary language of waka, of which she had considerable and widely acknowledged mastery, to address and express very serious and relatively private religious concerns and aspirations. In reading Senshi’s poems, it is as important to think about their relationship to the traditions and conventions of waka and to other waka texts as it is to think about their relationship to Buddhist thought, practices, and texts.

Some of Senshi’s poems discussed here may be encountered in more than one context in the canons of Japanese poetry. The effect of reading these poems in the context of her so-called “private collections” (shikashū), which actually contain poems not only by Senshi but also by women of her “salon” or retinue, or in the context of the cycle entitled Hosshin wakashū (“A Collection of Japanese Poems for the Awakening of Faith”),

1. Hereafter this work will be cited in notes as HSWKS.
which will receive special attention in this study, is very different from their effect when they are read grouped with others judged to be "of their kind," in one sense or another, by the compilers of the canonical waka anthologies (chokusenshū, i.e., imperially commissioned collections of Japanese poetry). Waka studies both in Japan and elsewhere tend to focus almost exclusively on the major waka anthologies—the Kokin wakashū, the Shin kokin wakashū, and the like—and for good reason, given their historical importance and the masterful effects achieved therein through the sophisticated arrangement of poems culled from diverse sources. The circumstances in which these anthologies were created imparted great prestige to them, and that prestige was imparted in turn to their contents. As a result, these anthologies have been dominant among the various settings in which readers have, for centuries, encountered the works of Japanese poets. But many of the poems encountered in such settings also can be and should be read within their original or at any rate alternative contexts: in cycles of poems composed for inscription on commemorative works of art, or in the competitive and highly charged sociopolitical setting of the utaawase, or poetry contest; or as self-contained entities conceived and composed for sharing in more intimate circumstances, such as those that appear to have pertained in the composition of Hosshin wakashū. When read in such contexts, new things come to light in these poems, things that may be obscured in the anthologized contexts, intriguing and appealing though they may be. By returning as best we can to contexts that we may think of as closer to those in which the poems were first conceived, composed, and read, we may also regain a sense of immediacy between poet and poem.

One finds, however, that if the reading context in which one encounters almost any traditional Japanese poem is a traditional Japanese context—be it an anthology (for example, a chokusenshū or shikashū), a narrative (for example, one of the many kinds of monogatari or nikki, i.e., "tales" or "diaries," categories that often overlap), or a theatrical script (such as the text of a Nō play) that makes extensive use of or reference to poems—one must inevitably come to terms with contextualizing information therein presented, in one way or another, concerning the poet and the circumstances in which he or she wrote that poem. Such information is presented in many traditional texts to their readers as "fact" or "history" in order to shape the way those readers read those texts—as happens, for example, with kotobagaki, the prose lead-ins supplied by traditional anthology editors to tell as much as can credibly be told (and sometimes more) about how poems got written, by whom, and in what circumstances.

Analysis of the dynamics of such contextualized readings, which are shaped by the interests and aims of writers other than those who wrote the poems, is a multifaceted problem that is addressed in various ways in
this study. In particular, however, it is addressed here in reference to the ways that Senshi’s poems have been read both in the past and in recent times. Given what others have done, it is not always easy to read Senshi’s poems first, and let them take precedence, before interpreting them, as is the custom, in light of what is known or supposed (often on the basis of the poems themselves) about the poet. Even in this study, Senshi’s poems are not read or treated as groups of signifiers adrift in a void but as utterable texts consciously crafted at a specific time by a specific person. It is not possible to retrieve a complete sense or understanding of the conditions of that time and the circumstances in which that person acted, and it is dangerous to try to reconstruct that time and those circumstances from the products thereof (the texts of the poems) alone. This study, therefore, also creates a context for the reading of Senshi’s poems by presenting what is known and what has been thought about her and them beforehand, but it does so to show, among other things, that the reading contexts created through such presentations produce only one or some of the many possible readings of those poems. In my reading, Senshi remains present as a historical personality, for it is my belief that poems get written in certain ways by the people who write them because of certain things about those people and the conditions and contexts in which they write—but one must be aware of how one comes by one’s knowledge of such things and of how it affects one’s reading. The historical Senshi, however one knows or perceives her, is, at any rate, not completely identical with the persona or personae that “speak” in her poems, and, furthermore, what one does or does not know about her does not necessarily decree what any one of her poems may or may not mean in one context or another or to one reader or another.

The single piece of information that has played the greatest role in shaping readings of Senshi’s poems, both in the past and recently, is the seemingly anomalous fact that she wrote “Buddhist poems,” and through them expressed something of her Buddhist faith, while she was at the same time High Priestess of the Kamo Shrines (Saiin)—that is, an imperially appointed official of the indigenous religious tradition called “Shintō.” Modern scholarship has shown quite conclusively that Shintō

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2. The title “Saiin” and its equivalent, “Itsuki no miya,” have sometimes been rendered as “Kamo Virgin” (as Saigū, the title of the High Priestess of Ise, is often rendered “Ise Virgin”). Like the Vestal Virgins, these priestesses were of royal birth, often appointed in early childhood or, at any rate, before puberty, and the maintenance of virginal purity was one of the expectations of a serving Saiin or Saigū. Some Kamo and Ise priestesses in both history and fiction are said to have had their amorous adventures, even while in service, but none of the stories about Senshi suggest that her virginity was ever lost.
and Buddhism were hardly ever distinct, at least not until a process of forcibly separating the two traditions and their institutions was begun in the Tokugawa period and completed by a series of government actions in the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras.³ Neil McMullin, summarizing his view of the Buddhist/Shintō relationship in premodern times (from the middle of the Heian period to Meiji), has gone so far as to state that "all so-called Buddhist institutions were at least partly Shintō, and all so-called Shintō institutions were at least partly Buddhist. In other words, all major religious institutions in Japan combined both Buddhist and Shintō elements in complex, integrated wholes. This institutional amalgam both reflected and generated the Buddhist-Shintō doctrinal and ritual synthesis."⁴ To obtain such a view, scholars have attempted to circumvent Tokugawa-period and later views of the relationship and to replace them with an image constructed from evidence produced in earlier times and found in a wide variety of materials, including literary texts. **Hosshin wakashū**, a devout Buddhist literary work by a laywoman who was in the middle of her extremely long term of service as High Priestess of Kamo when she wrote it, would seem to offer itself as a likely piece of evidence in support of this image of the confluence of the two religious streams. But in fact things are not quite that simple.

If anything, **Hosshin wakashū** reveals a consciousness of differentiation, of limits on the integration of the two traditions at one particular juncture. At least insofar as their relationship is depicted in this cycle of poems by this particular High Priestess, Kamo—one particular manifestation of Shintō as it was constituted in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries—and Buddhism were by no means at ease with each other. It might be said that such tensions as seem to have existed between them are precisely what *Hosshin wakashū* is all about. We must remember that what we read in such a text is not necessarily history per se, but rather literature produced by a historical personage in historical times, subject to the

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⁴. McMullin, ibid., 8.
influences of literary convention as well as those of artistic invention. But a particular kind of formal constraint upon the Buddhist/Shinto relationship is certainly one of the major topics of Senshi's literary works, and it could not have functioned so viably as a literary topic had it not shared or overlapped with some of the contours of her life experience (whatever they were).

It is no doubt true that men and women of Senshi's time experienced and understood the relationship between the two religious traditions in very different ways from those of Tokugawa figures like Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), but it may also be true that the relationship of certain Shinto institutions to Buddhist ones may have varied from one period to another, and that in certain periods some Shinto institutions—Kamo, for instance—may not have had the same relationship to Buddhism as did other institutions at that same time. To be sure, Kamo was one of a group of twenty-two major shrines (nijūnisha) that from early Heian times were paired with important adjacent Buddhist temples that also received imperial patronage (the temple associated with the Kamo Shrines was called the Kamo Jingūji; it no longer exists).\(^5\) Also, like many another Shinto deity, one of the kami worshiped at Kamo, "Kamo Daimyōjin," was often identified as a manifestation of a major Buddhist deity, in this case the bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteśvara).\(^6\) But there were also some special

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6. The fifth volume of Kojidan, an early Kamakura-period tale collection (compiled by Minamoto Akikane between 1212 and 1215), contains what appears to be the first instance of this particular identification—and ample illustration of the kind of amalgam of practices and beliefs described by McMullin. According to this tale, the scholar and poet Fujiwara Norikane (1107–65) was assigned administrative duties at the Kamo Shrine, and each time that he presented himself at the shrine he made an offering of a copy of the "Heart Sutra" (Shingyō). From the earliest stages of the development of Japanese Buddhism, this sutra was one of those most frequently copied for offertory purposes by devout laypersons. See also the discussion of HSWKS poem 5, below.) Norikane prospered as a result, and after a point was able to have all the offertory copies of the sutra executed in gold ink. Then, during an all-night vigil at the shrine, a beautiful female figure appeared to him. Of this apparition Norikane requested, first, that he might receive a promotion to higher rank, and also that he might not die before his mother. Then he asked, "What is the Buddhist manifestation (honji) of the Kamo deity?" whereupon the female figure turned into an image of Kannon (i.e., Sho Kannon, the "main" form of the bodhisattva rather than one of the many esoteric forms) holding a lotus flower. In the next instant, the image burst into flame and disintegrated into cinder and ash. Soon thereafter, Norikane had a similar image of Kannon made, and he presented it to the Tōzandō, one of the worship halls in the Kamo precincts. Subsequently, he did receive his promotion and also outlived his mother, and his descendants also prospered: all of this was attributed to the workings of Kamo Daimyōjin. Kojidan, in Kuroita Katsumi, ed., Shintei zōho kokushi taikei 18 (Tokyo: Kokushi taikei Kankōkai, 1932), 100.
ways in which the two religious streams were kept apart at Kamo as they were at Ise (which also had its own counterpart Buddhist institution and a Buddha to match its chief deity). The women who served as High Priestesses in these two cults—almost always imperial princesses—and the women and men who served them were expected to restrict their behavior and even their speech in various ways and thus were to keep Buddhism and its symbols, language, and adherents from tainting their own persons and precincts. Kuroda Toshio has suggested that the prohibition against speaking about Buddhism that prevailed at Ise "in fact does not imply a rejection of Buddhism but rather indicates a special attitude or etiquette assumed in the presence of the kami." This may be so—and may be a good reason for replacing the word "taboo" in discussions of these customs with something more like "habits or strategies of abstinence"—but it does not change the fact that these rules or customs were widely recognized and must certainly have altered the consciousness, if not the actual manners and speech, of women and men serving in these institutions. If not actually curtailed, their contacts with Buddhist monks and nuns (including family members and former colleagues), their participation in the kinds of rites that other lay women and men took part in, and even their private acts of devotion (prayer, meditation, sutra reading or copying, if they did that much) must have taken on a special character, and must have been carried out with some sense of otherness vis-à-vis other women and men of comparable status or class.

It remains difficult to say how strictly these restrictions or regulations (some, as shall be seen, were set forth in legal codes) were actually observed, and again one may assume that in certain times and in certain situations they may have been more strictly observed than at others. But it is certain that from Heian through Tokugawa times, people writing about the Kamo institution, from both inside and outside, were cognizant of these special, delimiting guidelines and saw fit to document various ways in which they were made manifest in behavior and practice. One of the earliest extant Kamo chronicles, the *Kamo Kōtaijingū ki* ("Records of the Imperial Kamo Shrines"), the oldest copy of which dates to 1405, concludes with some discussion of the verbal and other abstinences. As

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8. For a text, see Hanawa Hokiichi, ed., *Gunsho ruijū* 1 (Tokyo: Keizai Zasshisha, 1898), (Jingibu 15), 518–27. The author of the *Kamo Kōtaijingū ki* is not known, but it appears to be the sort of anecdotal chronicle that would have been written by hereditary shrine officials as documentation of the various traditions of the institution, thereby instilling those traditions with an aura of antiquarian authority. A similar, later document is the *Kamo chūshin zakki* of 1680, discussed below.
evidence of their gravity it cites a poem by Senshi (to be discussed in detail below) that has always been understood as a silent protest against them, and continues with an anecdote about a still better known poet, the famous monk Saigyō (1118–90): before he became a monk, it seems, Saigyō had been a faithful Kamo devotee; but late in life, while he was in the western provinces on one of his many pilgrimages, he realized that it had been a long time since he had paid his respects at Kamo and worried whether he would live long enough to do so, and so he returned to the capital forthwith. He made his visit to Kamo on the night of the tenth day of the tenth month of the second year of the Nin’an era (1167), but since he was now a monk and his physical presence in the precincts therefore prohibited (imitamau yue ni), he did not enter but stopped outside at the Tanao Shrine (a subsidiary of the Upper Kamo Shrine) and asked that his offering be made by intermediaries. The moonlight filtering down through the dense trees around the shrine made the mood of the moment and the place seem even more supernaturally charged (kamisabiriwatari) than usual. Deeply moved, Saigyō composed the following poem:

kashikomaru shide ni namida no kakaru ka na
mata itsu ka mo to omou aware ni

Tears fall on the strands of paper that are my offering,
from my grief at the thought that I may never come again.

The authors of the Kamo Kōtaijingū ki seem to have played a little fast and loose with this poem: although the kotobagaki attached to it in various earlier waka collections in which it appears (including Sankashū, the major collection of Saigyō’s own works, and Gyokuyō wakashū, a chokusenshū compiled in 1312) are essentially similar, all have “mata itsu ka wa to omou” instead of “mata itsu ka mo” in the poem. The meaning is the same (literally, “thinking ‘when shall I come again?’”), but the version in the Kamo chronicle makes it appear that Saigyō has cleverly and intentionally embedded the name of the Kamo Shrine itself in the poem he offered in lieu of personal performance of the act of worship. “It was thus,” explains the chronicle, “because the name of the Buddha and the like were prohibited (imitamau) in both the Ise and the Kamo Shrines. However, if one’s prayers are made with a sincere heart, is there any reason why they should not be

9. Some versions of the same story give Nin’an 3 (1168) as the date.
The implication is that Saigyō's offering was as good as anybody's, even if the fact that he was a Buddhist monk forced him to alter the manner of presentation. Thus, this Kamo chronicle, like others of its kind, acknowledges the special facets of Kamo/Buddhist relations and documents their durability, yet at the same time seems to play down their ultimate effect. It may be that this very ambivalence is, after all, the most telling thing about this tale.

The enduring image of Senshi that emerges in portrayals, both in traditional literature and in modern writing about her, is likewise of a woman who managed herself remarkably well in a terribly ambivalent situation: she found ways to serve both the Kamo gods and the state, on the one hand, and to pursue, express, and share her Buddhist faith with almost all who came in contact with her. But she was certainly no Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: no authorities ever forced her to give up one side of her life for another, or silenced her poetic voice out of fear of the influence her poems might have on others. Was ambivalence really a great burden that Senshi had to bear through most of her life, or was it essentially a peculiar poetic position in which to stand and voice certain sentiments, whether real or fabricated, or exaggerated? Did she really believe as she wrote, even about such things as the special handicaps that face women in Buddhism (of this, more below), or were such thematic and topical manipulations simply more deft handling of the array of poetic figures that lay at her disposal and presented themselves as apt for her use?

Perhaps both ways of understanding her are helpful. And it may be that her devotion to and absorption in waka—as art and pastime, as a mode of communication, as a valuable skill imparted graciously and authoritatively to younger women—were just as great as her devotion to her official duties or to her Buddhist goals, and maybe even greater. Writing Hosshin wakashū may not have perfectly reconciled these competing interests—if indeed they were in competition—but perhaps it was a way of creating a kind of textual arena in which they all might meet and in which their points of contact could be exposed. Such tensions as may have existed among them, if only in some formal or figurative sense, might then be made much of, for poetic and dramatic effect, and might also through such manipulation be diminished.


12. Octavio Paz's Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988) is one recent study of this great Mexican poet (1651–95), a Hieronymite nun who in 1693 was forced by church fathers to give up the studies of philosophy, science, and secular literature that had been the sources of inspiration for her own works. She apparently accepted the demand that she be silent: though prolific up to that time, she wrote nothing whatsoever in the last two years of her life.
But, as we shall see, the thematic progression played out in her cycle of Buddhist poems ends not in reconciled peace and the assured anticipation of bliss but in a suspension, a state of lingering doubt still undercutting the desire to believe and hope wholeheartedly. The text might come to an end, but the work would have to go on: faith would continue to require nurture of the kind offered in Hosshin wakashū, and more. The final reward for the effort would not come in this life, but in the life to come; yet in the meantime, there might be other satisfactions, such as those enjoyed through the sharing of these poems and others like them. Though this is the only such cycle that Senshi is known to have written, it might well have served as the model for many more, by Senshi and others.

It may also have served in one other way as well: it is possible that in some way Senshi's composition of these poems may have led to a transformation in one aspect of the waka tradition itself. Up until her own time, Shakkyōka had not yet become part of the canon as defined by the range of topics and modes included in the official anthologies. But perhaps because poets like Senshi sought and found ways to adapt the canonical, secular waka to Buddhist contexts, in admirable acts of composition presented as sincere devotional exercises, this eventually changed: a place was made in the anthologies, beginning with the fourth, the Goshūi wakashū—compiled in 1086, about five decades after her death—for a few such poems, and eventually some of the chokusenshū Shakkyōka sections included some of her own poems as well. Thus, what had once been treated as peripheral was brought to the center. The inclusion of "Buddhist poems" like Senshi's in the anthologies compiled in the centuries after her death marks the acceptance of such poetry as a distinguished compositional mode, a shift made possible, in part, by the transfer of such prestige as her own to a type of waka with which she, perhaps somewhat ironically, had come to be so very closely identified.
