From Kokinshu to Shinkokinshu

Along with the affinity for drinking, perhaps the most recognizable and unchanging facet of Japanese culture is the presence and importance of poetry. The Kokinshu and Shinkokinshu were both commissioned by the Emperors of the time, partially to grant the Emperor an ego-boost and partially as a proud record of the great poems of past and present. Kokinshu means “Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems”, and by tacking “Shin” onto the front of the title, it literally becomes the “new” Kokinshu. The primary differences between Kokinshu and Shinkokinshu stem from the changes in the Japan’s perspective of the world around them. The prominent deviation between the two was the difference in the level profoundness or subtlety that was used to relay a poem’s meaning. Though the importance of poetry to the Japanese was unchanged in the 300 years between the two anthologies, the differences in the way that they were written reveals deeper cultural metamorphoses in Japan during this time.

The Kokinshu embraced the concept of “elegant confusion”, where the author purposefully imbues his or her poem with doubt as to what events are to come. The lines, “Surely now the frozen tears of mountain thrush will melt away” (Rodd 50) implies both the author’s hope that the snow will melt, and the uncertainty of whether or not this will actually happen. Poems are also typically filled with longing and sorrow, with the hope that something will soon change within their author’s dissatisfactory lives. Buddhist concepts regularly saturated these poems, such as when one hopes that he “might soon move on to the next life” (Rodd 198), seeking to one day imprison the troubles of his present life as memories. The poems were, however, typically unrelated to one another, with each being a micro-story of the thematic section that it belonged to - Spring, Love, Travel, etc. - and often left their message to be scooped up on the surface level.

The Shinkokinshu, however, subscribes to the ideal of “Yu gen”, which embodies subtlety and grace. The presence of Yu Gen created an entirely new lens through which to view Japanese poetry; multiple layers of meaning, ambiguity, and the absence of a definite interpretation required greater contemplation and insight in order to be understood. This was a colossal literary shift from the Kokinshu, whose poems are brief and to the point. As time moved forward, the suggestiveness of the poem, rather than what it states implicitly, became what was important. “What then shall I do about / these sparkling drops on my sleeves?” (Rodd, 11) Fujiwara no Akinaka leaves the reader to ponder this, clearly filled with angst due to his unrequited yearning. The beauty of a poem, even a sad one such as this, was to wash over the reader for an extended period of time. Greater purpose and meaning attained clarity as the poem was meditated upon, perhaps as the reader formed connections between the author’s struggle and his or her own life.

While both anthologies compile the great (or not-so-great) poetic works of the time, the differences in the way that the Kokinshu and Shinkokinshu are presented shows how the general mindset of the Japanese had evolved over time. While the Kokinshu smacked the reader over the head with it’s simple lesson, tale, or musings, the Shinkokinshu would require much deeper reflection to understand properly.