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Abstract: Yamanoue no Okura’s 山上憶良 (660–733?) writings in the *Man’yōshū* 萬葉集 anthology present unique challenges of linguistic and literary-historical reconstruction. Composed in various permutations of *man’yōgana* and logographic script and also in Chinese (*kanbun*), Okura’s texts are replete with allusions to Chinese texts ranging from the Confucian canon to apocryphal Buddhist sutras and popular anthologies, many of which are lost or survive only in Dunhuang manuscripts. But the technical challenges in approaching Okura’s writings should not blind us to the spirit of skeptical self-awareness that underlie these literary artifacts. Okura frequently cites the spiritual doctrines contained in his Chinese sources: the overcoming of suffering in Buddhist scripture, the perfection of the body through Daoist practices, or the ethical responsibilities set out in Confucian teachings. But he has a singular practice of partial or misleading quotation: borrowing scattered fragments of philosophy or religion, but reusing them to shape singular representations of his own experience. This article will first present an overview of Okura’s extant works as contained in the *Man’yōshū* anthology, as well as the primary Chinese sources that seem to have influenced him. The next three sections analyze particular works of Okura in light of their Chinese intertexts, roughly organized around their Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian orientations. The conclusion offers some tentative indications of how Okura’s distinctive reactions to his sources influenced his own literary style, and also regarding Okura’s legacy for Japanese letters.

Being Alive: Doctrine versus Experience in the Writings of Yamanoue no Okura

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“Rather I chuse laboriously to bear
 A weight of woes, and breath the vital air,
 A slave to some poor hind that toils for bread;
 Than reign the scepter’d monarch of the dead.”

—Achilles in the underworld¹

A dead man is not even as good as a rat.

—Yamanoue no Okura

Okura as East Asian Writer and Reader

Yamanoue no Okura 山上憶良 (660–733?) lived at a critical period in the Japanese transformation of Chinese institutions and culture, and himself played a significant role as a cultural intermediary—not just as ambassador to the Tang, but also through his writings in Japanese and *kanbun*, all of which are preserved in the *Man’yōshū* 萬葉集 anthology. Okura is distinguished among *Man’yōshū* authors for his profuse displays of Chinese erudition, including a deep acquaintance with Buddhist sutras. But Okura’s allusion and quotation of Chinese texts frequently offer skeptical or transformative interpretations of those sources. They present a unique vantage point on an early stage of the reception of Chinese thought and literature in Japan, in which we see both elite doctrines and popular traditions through the

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¹ *Odyssey*, 11.488–91; translation from *Poems of Alexander Pope, Volume IX*, 412.

eyes of a critical observer, weighing the ideas transmitted via Chinese texts against the measure of his experience—from life and love through illness and death.

According to one theory, Okura may have immigrated from the Paekche Kingdom of Korea as a small child.² He could also have attained his Chinese erudition while serving as ambassador on a mission to the Tang from 701 to around 704.³ He returned to pursue a moderately successful career highlighted by literary brilliance. In 714 he was promoted to the junior fifth rank, lower grade, and in 716 appointed governor of Hōki (in the west of modern Tottori prefecture). From 721 to approximately 726 he participated in the literary salon of the Crown Prince (later Emperor Shōmu) in the East Palace.⁴ He then served until 730 as governor of Chikuzen 筑前 (the northwestern part of modern Fukuoka prefecture), where he was joined by Ōtomo no Tabito 大伴旅人 (665–731) serving as governor-general of Dazaifu. The two writers shared literary entertainments and aspirations, joining in both

² This idea seems first to have been suggested by Tsuchiya Bunmei 土屋文明 (*Man'yōshū shichū*), but its strongest proponent has been Nakanishi Susumu 中西進 (Nakanishi, *Yamanoue no Okura*, 23–45); see also “Okura no omi no kabane” 憶良の臣姓, in Murayama, *Yamanoue no Okura no kenkyū*, 273–90. The suggestion is appealing from both a theoretical and personal point of view, and has even inspired a work of historical fiction (Hoshino, *Ten no me Yamanoue no Okura*). But it has also been vigorously criticized by historians; among other points, they argue that Omi 臣 surnames were not normally awarded to Korean immigrants (for one critique, see Aoki, “Okura kikajin setsu hihan”). The debate was most heated in the 1970s, but there has been little progress since then because of the fundamental paucity of concrete evidence either way. It is perhaps more economical simply to recognize that we do not know much about his family background apart from an ambiguous reference in the *Shinsen shōjiroku* 新撰姓氏録 (Saeki, *Shinsen shōjiroku no kenkyū*, 178). However, it is worth noting that the *MYS* does contain important and explicit references of contact with the Korean peninsula; see, e.g., Kajikawa, *Man'yōshū to Shinra*, for a recent survey of relations with Silla as reflected in the *Man'yōshū*.

³ Though he was appointed ambassador in 701, the mission only departed in 702. Nakanishi gives a useful, if largely speculative, account of the contours of such a mission in Nakanishi, *Yamanoue no Okura*, 71–134.

⁴ Regrettably little of his work from this period survives, but we can speculate on their activities based on the names of the sixteen members of the salon. See Nakanishi, *Yamanoue no Okura*, 135–48.

playful exchanges and more solemn compositions, as in Okura's eulogy for Tabito's wife.⁵ Finally, Okura wrote some of his most powerful and introspective works in the final years of his life, as he was beset by debilitating illness, exacerbated by the loss of his friend Tabito in 731. Okura's last dated work was composed in 733, but it is possible that he survived to some later date.⁶

Okura's writings, preserved solely in the *Man'yōshū* anthology, present unique challenges of linguistic and literary-historical reconstruction.⁷ Our knowledge of Okura comes almost entirely from the *Man'yōshū* anthology, and in particular the fifth book, which is dominated so exclusively by Okura and his associates that it might appear to have been compiled originally by him, or based on his own documents.⁸ The fifth book has the dual peculiarity, in relation to the rest of the *Man'yōshū*, of including numerous *kanbun* prose pieces and poems, and also of relying heavily on *man'yōgana* phonograms rather than logograms, thus emphasizing the contrast between Chinese and Japanese readings.⁹ It also

⁵ "Nihon banka" 日本挽歌, *MYS*, 5.794–99. Takagi Ichinosuke 高木市之助 argued in various venues, beginning with "Futatsu no sei," that Okura and Tabito represented two diametrically opposed worldviews.

⁶ In spite of his own professed debility, that year was a prolific one for him in terms of literary composition. Apart from the essay "Condoling Myself" (after *MYS*, 5. 896) we know to have been written in that year, he also authored a valedictory *chōka* to the ambassadors to Tang (see *MYS*, 5.894–96). Some of the other pieces in Book V could easily date to the same period.

⁷ Okura's surviving writings are all in the *Man'yōshū* (hereafter *MYS*) anthology (compiled in the late 8th century sometime after 759), and are contained mainly in the fifth book. I have relied primarily on Book V of *Man'yōshū zenchū*, edited by Imura Tetsuo, as well as the *NKBT* and *SNBKT* editions. Citations follow the numbering system used in these editions, which is based on *Kokka taikan*. For an English-language study of early Japanese writing see Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*; on the *MYS* in general Horton, *Traversing the Frontier*, is currently the best English-language overview.

⁸ Though it is impossible to tell anything about the concrete process of compilation at this late date, the focus on Okura and his circle in this fascicle strongly suggests that it was at the least adapted from some earlier, Okura-centric compilation. See Hisamatsu, *Man'yōshū no kenkyū*, 140–50.

⁹ On the details of the *man'yōgana* in Book V, along with speculations as to authorship, see Inaoka, *Man'yō hyōki ron*, 217–452.

poses some special problems of attribution, with a substantial number of poems that might have been authored by either Okura or Tabito or a third party.¹⁰ Okura's poetry is also characterized by his emphasis on topics rare both in the *Man'yōshū* and later Japanese poetry, as he writes of facing disease and death in passionate detail. Most of Okura's poems are in the form special to the *Man'yōshū*, the *chōka* "long song" with one or more *tanka* "short song" envoys following it, often with a preface in Chinese. He also may have played a role in the compilation of the anthology, through his earlier anthology the *Ruijū karin* 類聚歌林, which does not survive but served as an important source for the early portion of the *Man'yōshū*.¹¹

Many of Okura's writings are given only tentative attribution in the *MYS*; either he is identified as one possible author, or his authorship is inferred from context. Okura's earliest appearance in the textual record is dated to the year 690, but this only a secondary attribution to a poem also attributed to the crown prince Kawashima 川島 (657–691), right in the first book (*MYS*, 1.34). A virtually identical poem later in the anthology, however, is attributed directly to Okura (*MYS*, 9.1716). Another poem reflecting on the death of Prince Arima 有間 must date to the year 701 or later.¹² Outside of Book V, Okura also has a series of twelve Tanabata poems (*MYS*, 8.1518–29), and set of ten fishermen's songs attributed uncertainly to

¹⁰ E.g. the complex case of the Matura River poems (*MYS*, 5.853–63). Inaoka points out (*Man'yō hyōki ron*, 430–31) that three fundamental problems hinder our understanding of Book V: 1) the large number of anonymous poems; 2) the incomplete state of poem titles; 3) the large number of poems that are taken out of some context, such as an exchange of letters. Inaoka's attempt to resolve these problems by rigorous analysis of the use of *man'yōgana* is enlightening but not quite definitive.

¹¹ The *Ruijū karin* is cited in the annotation after poems *MYS*, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.12, 1.18, 2.85, and 9.1673. On the pivotal role of *Ruijū karin* in shaping the *Man'yōshū*, see Hisamatsu, *Man'yōshū no kenkyū*, 2:378–86. Hisamatsu also points out Okura's influence on Yakamochi, whose works dominate the last four books of the anthology. The two points together suggest that Okura's overall influence on the formation of the anthology was critical.

¹² *MYS*, 2.145. See Cranston, *A Waka Anthology*, 1:483–86, for translation of this poem and the series to which it belongs.

him (*MYS*, 16.3860–69).¹³ These works alone would form an interesting but somewhat disparate oeuvre, so it is really Book V of the anthology that presents us with Okura as a unique and integral literary persona. This persona is well complemented by two other individual poems found outside Book V, namely Okura's valedictory poem (*MYS*, 6.978), and a poem in Book III explains that he must leave a party to be with his family (*MYS*, 3.337). This latter theme of familial love is a vital one throughout Okura's works.

Book V contains a varied assortment of writings apart from those attributed to Okura. On one hand, its theme might be described as mortality, since the book opens with a *tanka* by Tabito in response to news of someone's death (5.793) and ends with a *chōka* and two envoys on the death of a boy named Furuhi (5.904–6), attributed to Okura.¹⁴ On the other hand, Book V also contains two long poetic sequences: one celebrating plums at a party held by Tabito in 730, the other suite preceded by *kanbun* preface, on a meeting with fishing maidens at Matura River.¹⁵ Each plum poem is attributed to a specific author, including Okura and Tabito themselves, but the authorship of the Matura poems is unclear.

Yet another distinctive unit within Book V is Okura's "Kama Trilogy," so called because of an annotation after *MYS*, 5.805 indicates that the three preceding works were completed on August 30, 728, at Kama 嘉摩 (a bit northeast of Dazaifu).¹⁶ These are the "Song for Dispelling Deluded Passions" 令反惑情歌 (5.800–801), "Song of Longing for My Children" 思子等歌 (5.802–3), and "Song Lamenting How Difficult It Is to Stay in the

¹³ The former is translated in part and the latter in full in Cranson, *A Waka Anthology*, 1:347 and 1:373–75, respectively.

¹⁴ There is a marginal note after the second envoy saying that the "authorship of the poem on the right is unknown" 右一首作者未詳, although it resembles "the Yamanoue style" 山上之操.

¹⁵ *MYS* 5.815–46 and 853–63; translated in full by Cranston in *A Waka Anthology*, 1:41–50 and 1:550–54, respectively.

¹⁶ The commandery office of Kama was located in modern Kamō 鴨生, Inatsuki 稲築 cho, Fukuoka.

World” 衰世間難住歌 (5.804–5).¹⁷ These works share a distinctive structure: *kanbun* preface, *chōka*, and *tanka* envoy, along with an explicit attention to fundamental issues of life and death. Though some of the three pieces, or parts of all of them, may have been composed earlier than 728,¹⁸ in their extant form they seem to form a coherent study of key problems in life: one’s obligations to society; love for children (and implicitly family in general), and the transience of earthly things. Book V also contains Okura’s long *kanbun* essay “Condoling Myself for Dire Illness” 沈痾自哀文, translated and discussed below, which is a thorough study of Okura’s response to life-threatening illness and his recourse to various remedies, both pharmaceutical and philosophical.¹⁹ These weighty compositions occupy much of the text of Book V and present Okura as a man much concerned with the meaning of his own life.

Okura and Tabito’s friendship and collaboration, as reflected in Book V, also provided a model for Ōtomo no Yakamochi 大伴家持 (ca. 718–785).²⁰ Yakamochi’s poems are extremely prominent in the final four books of the anthology, which may be based on his own collection. The final poem in the anthology (*MYS*, 20.4516) is ascribed to Yakamochi and dated 759, so marking a *terminus a quo* for the compilation of the anthology as a whole. Yakamochi, like Okura, interwove *kanbun* compositions with *tanka* and *chōka*.²¹ On the other hand, his compositions generally tend more to a flowery court style. The exception that proves this rule is the *kanbun* preface to *MYS*, 17.3965–66, in which Yakamochi begins by

¹⁷ *MYS*, 5.804–5.

¹⁸ The note after *MYS*, 5.805 says that the poems were 撰定 on this date, which could just mean “selected and finalized” (*erabisadameru*).

¹⁹ After *MYS*, 5.896.

²⁰ See Doe, *A Warbler’s Song in the Dusk*, a fine initial foray into a poet whose work deserves further study.

²¹ These include *kanbun* prefaces to *tanka* (before *MYS*, 17.3965, 17.3969, 18.4106) and one *kanshi* with preface (before 17.3976).

describing his own physical frailty due to illness, but for the remainder of the composition turns instead to scenes of springtime on which he is missing out.

Though Okura's literary endeavors were well-regarded in his own time, for more than a millennium afterwards he was underappreciated. Okura's stubbornly personal and realistic poetry seemed out of place in the main tradition of court *waka* poetry. As Edwin Cranston has observed, "to the extent that Okura's social themes were dealt with by later poets, they were dealt with in kanshi, poetry in the Chinese language."²² When *kokugaku* scholars like Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697–1769) revived interest in the *Man'yōshū* in the 18th century, they aimed to contrast its Japanese authenticity with the Chinese-inflected literature of the classical and medieval period. Okura's flaunted Chinese erudition thus ran contrary to the aspects of the *Man'yōshū* that scholars sought to emphasize.

The convoluted history of *Man'yō* studies had an unfortunate practical consequence. The influential anthology-cum-index *Kokka taikan* 国歌大観 numbers all the poems in the *Man'yōshū*, and these numbers have remained the primary means to cite the poems in the anthology.²³ Since the anthology was intended as a repository of *waka*, though, it naturally omitted Okura's *kanbun* pieces. Thus in modern Japanese scholarship they continue to be identified by the number of the preceding poem, even though the tables of contents in the earliest texts of the *Man'yōshū* actually list these pieces properly in order. This creates the impression that Okura's writings are more exceptional than they actually were, since in Nara and Heian Japan there were numerous courtiers who excelled at both *waka* and *kanshi* poetry. After the *Man'yōshū*, however, these poems were anthologized separately. If Okura's *kanbun* essays had been included in an anthology of Chinese writings like the *Keikokushū* 經國集, they would fit more naturally into the history of Sino-Japanese literature. On the other hand,

²² Cranston, *A Waka Anthology*, 1:359.

²³ They were revised in the *Shinpen kokka taikan*, but still did not include the Chinese essays in the anthology.

it has probably been good for Okura's reputation in modern Japan that he is in the much-loved *Man'yōshū* rather than one of the less popular Chinese collections.²⁴

In recent decades, Okura has been the subject of extensive scholarship in Japanese,²⁵ but only partial studies in English.²⁶ For instance, while Imura Tetsuo 井村哲夫 has done much to elucidate the Buddhist implications of Okura's writings, particularly in terms of his sophisticated reflections on the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, these insights have not drawn much attention in Western scholarship. More broadly, Okura's engagement with Buddhist sutras and other Chinese texts remains a vast field rich in significance for our understanding of the intellectual life of early Japan, and even throughout East Asia.²⁷ The primary corpus of texts that survive from medieval China belong to the elite tradition of the imperial court, such as literary

²⁴ On the importance of restoring *kanbun* works to their rightful place in the history of Japanese literature, see Wixted, "Kanbun, Histories of Japanese Literature, and Japanologists."

²⁵ A detailed recounting of Japanese-language scholarship on Okura would be so daunting that this author would have to give up his inquiry into the poet, but major monographs include the aforementioned Nakanishi, *Yamanoue no Okura*, and Murayama, *Yamanoue no Okura no kenkyū*, as well as Ōkubo 1997 and Higashi, *Yamanoue no Okura no kenkyū*. Other major works that discuss Okura (often together with Tabito) include Takagi, *Ōtomo no Tabito, Yamanoue no Okura*; Murayama, *Yūshū to kunō*; and Taniguchi, *Gairai shisō to Nihonjin*. The scholar who peers most deeply into Okura's intellectual universe is Imura Tetsuo, in the essays collected in Imura, *Okura to Mushimaro; Akara kobune: Man'yō sakka saku hin ron*; and *Okura – Mushimaro to Tenpyō kadan*. Sakamoto and Kōnoshi, *Manyō no kajin to saku hin*, v. 4, contains valuable studies of individual pieces.

²⁶ Previous scholarship in English includes the major contribution of Miller "A Korean Poet in Eighth-Century Japan," illuminating but partly vitiated by its overreliance on the speculations of Nakanishi Susumu; Imura, "The Influence of Buddhist Thought on the *Man'yōshū* Poems of Yamanoue no Okura," a superb distillation of Imura's numerous Japanese essays on Okura; and Edwin Cranston's masterful translations of many of Okura's works in *A Waka Anthology: Vol. 1, The Gem-Glistening Cup*. There is also a dissertation on Okura and Tabito (Robinson, "The Tsukushi Man'yōshū Poets and the Invention of Japanese Poetry"), and most recently, a comprehensive translation and linguistic study of Book 5 (Vovin, *Man'yōshū: Book 5, A New English Translation*). There is not yet any comprehensive English-language monograph on Okura.

²⁷ On the influence of Chinese sources in the *MYS*, see Kojima's monumental *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, and also the more recent Haga, *Man'yōshū ni okeru Chūgoku bungaku no juyō*.

collections of aristocratic authors and imperially sanctioned histories, as well as the religious canons of Buddhism and Daoism. Through a few surviving manuscripts and the evidence of *mokkan* it is clear that many of these canonical works were available in Nara.²⁸ But one of the most striking elements of Okura's *kanbun* writings is the strong evidence that he also had access to a range of "ephemeral popular works."²⁹ These include commonplace books transcribing quotations from diverse sources, and popularizations of Daoist methods for attaining longevity.

In some cases Okura's sources have not survived in any form, but in a few select cases we can identify them through texts preserved in the grottoes of Dunhuang. This is the case, for instance, with the apocryphal *Sutra of Extending Longevity*, which borrows the authority of the Buddha to advocate the fundamentally Daoist pursuit of immortality. Preserved in multiple versions from Dunhuang, this is something like a medieval pamphlet, a text just a couple of hundred characters long, that could be written out on a single sheet of paper (as on, say, P.2171). Okura quotes this text in the long essay "Condoling Myself for Dire Illness," translated and discussed below. Even apart from this quotation of a popular religious pamphlet, the essay is written in a casual, even haphazard manner that would be out of place in an essay by a contemporary Chinese scholar. Yet the very same essay also cites a memorable poetic couplet by Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), Emperor of the Wei dynasty and a prominent exemplar of China's elite poetic tradition—a couplet, moreover, that seems not to have been preserved at all in Chinese sources. What is so fascinating about Okura's practice of quotation and allusion is his intermingling of registers and traditions, quoting a Chinese emperor here, a popular Daoist tract there, in a complex intercultural *bricolage*.

²⁸ Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, 280.

²⁹ Ibid.

The selective quotation of poetic couplets from the Chinese tradition might seem to anticipate the similar trend that would reach its climax in the *Wa-Kan rōeishū* 和漢朗詠集 (ca. 1012) anthology. At the same time, Okura's disparate references (whether explicit quotations or implicit allusions) also reflect the fundamental scarcity of Chinese texts. Even though Okura had joined an embassy to the Tang, allowing him access, in theory, to practically any early Tang or pre-Tang text, the number of works he could have brought back to Japan, let alone kept for his personal use, would have been extremely limited. Thus he would have had to rely on commonplace books (*leishu* 類書) instead. In particular, it seems that he employed a moralizing work entitled *Lizhong jiechao* 勵忠節鈔, partially preserved in Dunhuang. In this regard Okura is a precursor to writers of *kanbun* throughout the Heian. The canonical Tang commonplace books, *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 and *Chuxue ji* 初學記, continued to be highly influential in Heian Japan, along with primers like the *Thousand Character Classic*.³⁰ Similarly, Li Jiao's "Poems on Things," widely-read in Heian Japan, are a kind of *leishu* themselves, since the 120 poems are arranged in topical categories, each one poem collects familiar poetic associations with a particular object.³¹ As in these illustrative later cases, Okura's knowledge and adaptation of Chinese sources would have been filtered through the texts available to him, and the bricolage inherent in commonplace books seems to have influenced the composition of his own works as well.

Yet this is not to say that Okura's knowledge of Chinese sources was fragmentary. The *Lotus Sutra* and several other Buddhist scriptures were already widely available during the Nara period, thanks to the industrious effort of sutra-copying sponsored by the state.³² Below we shall see evidence of Okura's familiarity with the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* and *Nirvāṇa*

³⁰ See Guest, "Primers, Commentaries, and Kanbun Literacy in Japanese Literary Culture, 950–1250 CE."

³¹ See Steininger, "Li Jiao's *Songs*: Commentary-Based Reading and the Reception of Tang Poetry in Heian Japan," 106.

³² There is an overview with helpful bibliography in Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, 79–87.

sūtra, in particular. Similarly, many of his writings in both *kanbun* and Japanese cannot be fully understood apart from the high literary tradition of China, epitomized in the *Wenxuan* 文選 anthology of Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531). The “Song for Dispelling Deluded Passions,” which is translated and discussed below, can hardly be detached from the early medieval debates about self-authenticity and political service to which it refers. So far as it is possible, we should not exaggerate either Okura’s erudition or his ignorance: he might have read practically any work produced up through the seventh century, but also could have been ignorant of major texts to which we have easy access today.

Though Okura’s work employs citation or allusion to a wide variety of Chinese texts, one explicit focus of Okura studies heretofore has been his reaction to Chinese thought. Above all, Imura Tetsuo has elucidated Okura’s complex understanding of Buddhism, partly devout and partly idiosyncratic.³³ More broadly, though, Okura’s writings fall naturally into a classification according to the “Three Teachings” 三教 of China, depending on whether they engage primarily with Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian doctrine.³⁴ Though Okura’s texts can be valuable sources of information on the transmission of texts or doctrines, one should be cautious about treating them as historical data. Okura’s citation and interpretation of Chinese texts is by no means neutral or scholarly, but rather is single-mindedly focused on how the theoretical doctrines contained within these sources can serve in practical application to his own life.

Even while quoting sources, Okura shows a consistent resistance towards the dogmatic elements within these doctrines that contradict basic human impulses towards

³³ See the various works of Imura cited above. Haga Norio also employs a similar method in writing of Okura’s *gyakuyō* 逆用 of Chinese sources. See Haga, *Man’yōshū ni okeru Chūgoku bungaku no juyō*, 403.

³⁴ See, e.g., Masuo, *Man’yō kajin to Chūgoku shisō*. Though not a comprehensive study but more topical, this is a ground-breaking study of the complex varieties of Chinese thought that influence *MYS* poets.

self-preservation and familial attachment. For Okura, the Confucian canons offer a model for family and social relationships, but are not of much help in the face of disease and death; Daoist practices and potions are useful means to extend one's life, but their promises of transcending the world are empty; Buddhist sutras offer much consolation and spiritual aid, but their theoretical claims are false to the profound meaning of human attachments in this life. Okura himself refers to these types of doctrines by the term *kyō* 教,³⁵ defined in the Eastern Han dynasty *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 as “what is imposed from above and imitated from below” 上所施下所效也.³⁶ He continually evinces a resistance to what is imposed, and a skepticism about what model one should imitate. Ultimately he adapts these in a flexible manner to convey his own singular point of view, affirming repeatedly that being alive is itself the most precious thing for human beings.³⁷

Taking into account, though, both the graphico-linguistic complexity of his works, and the miscellaneity of the writings that influenced him, we should still be astonished at what Okura produced out of these influences. His surviving works display a single-minded fascination with the fundamental question of how to live in the face of death, a literary orientation that can only be called existential. Okura's example might serve, incidentally, as a caution regarding the study of classical literatures for us modern scholars, so easily swayed by the convenient generalization or overarching theorization, to remember the individual lives at stake in these texts. We begin by examining how Okura offers an implicit critique of Buddhist doctrine by reference to his paternal feelings.

³⁵ Used, e.g., in his *kanbun* essays “Condoling Myself for Dire Illness” 沉痾自哀文 and “Lamenting and Grieving that the Common Way Is to Cohere Temporarily and Soon Disperse, How Easy It Is to Depart and How Difficult to Stay: One Poem with Preface” 悲嘆俗道假合即離易去難留, both before *MYS* 5.896. See below.

³⁶ See *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 3B.127.

³⁷ It would be worthwhile to explore how this relates to the larger question of the function of ideology in premodern Japan.

A Critique of Buddhist Detachment

Okura's employment of allusions and quotations from Buddhist sutras best displays the complexity of his attitude, since it is easy to find examples of both appreciation and opposition towards Buddhist faith in his works. Though we cannot ascertain exactly how Okura encountered the sutras to which he refers in his work, two modern scholars have identified particular sutras as the primary influence on Okura: Roy Andrew Miller the *Vimalakīrti nirdeśa sūtra* (*Vimalakīrti sūtra*), and Imura Tetsuo the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (*Nirvāṇa sūtra*).³⁸ The fact that they each identified different sutras as primary suggests a difficulty already, and it is one that has been compounded by later research on the subject, with Japanese scholars continuing to identify other sources for the Buddhist allusions in Okura's work. Miller's and Imura's analyses remains valid, however, particularly in confirming that Okura shows a particular interest in those episodes of the Buddhist sutras having to do with the life and death of Śākyamuni, his family, and his followers (as opposed to the philosophical doctrines also contained therein).

In particular, Okura employs Buddhist references to contextualize and reexamine his own love for his children. Though we cannot identify how many children Okura had, paternal love forms a major theme of his extant writings, not least the *chōka* lamenting the death of a son named Furuhi (*MYS*, 5.904–6), a major work that concludes Book V of the *MYS*.³⁹ On a more intimate scale, the “Song of Longing for My Children” 思子等歌 is a charming and

³⁸ For these identifications see Miller, “A Korean Poet in Eighth-Century Japan,” 710–17, though the specification of Okura as an adherent of “Paekche Buddhism” is problematic; and Imura, “The Influence of Buddhist Thought on the *Man'yōshū* Poems of Yamanoue no Okura,” 6–10, emphasizing in particular the second section of the work, the “Book of Cunda” 純陀品.

³⁹ Since I plan to devote more attention to this complex work in another study, I omit it from the discussion here.

rather profound study of what a visceral familial feeling means in a world of suffering. The *chōka* and envoy poem are framed by a *kanbun* preface that employs two Buddhist references in a startling manner:⁴⁰

The Tathāgata Buddha, from his mouth firm as metal, once said: “I love equally all the myriad living things, as [my own son] Rāhula.” And he also said, “No love surpasses that for a child.” Thus even the great Sage had feelings of love for his child; how then could any one of us grass-born mortals fail to love his children?
釋迦如來金口正說：等思衆生如羅睺羅。又說：愛無過子。至極大聖，尚有愛子之心，況乎世間蒼生，誰不愛子乎？

Here Okura employs two quotations from the Buddhist canon as doctrinal support for the validity of his own paternal love. The first alludes to the Buddha’s own son Rāhula. In the opening of the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, the Buddha explains that one ought to treat all living things with equal compassion, and so compares his love for any living thing with his love for his own son. Okura’s quotation does not appear in the exact same phrasing in the extant Buddhist canon, but there are numerous slight variations on this idea, as when it is said that the Tathāgata Buddha “regards the myriad living beings like Rāhula” 視諸衆生如羅睺羅, and for that reason would exert himself to save any of them from the torments of Hell.⁴¹ The Buddha explains this in response to a question, asking why he does not do more to save pious believers. But Okura is not presenting the source material in an entirely faithful manner. In a sense he actually inverts the religious message, as if the Buddha were instructing people to love their own sons more. Okura’s expression of filial love is not itself necessarily inconsistent with Buddhist compassion, but it is striking how he playfully but tendentiously adapts scripture to imply its own opposite.

⁴⁰ *MYS*, 5.802–3. Cf. discussion of this passage in Imura, “The Influence of Buddhist Thought on the *Man’yōshū* Poems of Yamanoue no Okura,” 24–27.

⁴¹ *T* 375: 12.627a. Imura Tetsuo shows that the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* is the primary source for this statement (Imura, *Okura to Mushimaro*, 89–92).

The second quotation can be found almost word-for-word in the Buddhist canon, though with one important grammatical distinction. According to the *Samyuktāgama sūtra* 雜阿含經, when the Buddha visited the Kingdom of Śrāvastī, he met a prince who recited the *gātha*:⁴²

所愛無過子 Nothing is loved more than a child,
 財無貴於牛 No property is more valuable than a cow,
 光明無過日 No light surpasses that of the sun,
 薩羅無過海 No gathering of waters exceeds the ocean.⁴³

The Buddha responded with another *gātha*:

愛無過於己 As there is no love that surpasses that of self,
 財無過於穀 No property that surpasses grain:
 光明無過慧 So there is no light that surpasses wisdom,
 薩羅無過見 No gathering of waters that surpasses perception.

The prince then bows at the foot of the Buddha, who vanishes from sight. What becomes apparent, then, is that Okura's ascription to the Buddha of the view that no love surpasses the love of a parent can only be said to be accurate in the very technical sense that the idea is expressed in a Buddhist sutra. But the specific context is one in which a facile prince presents various problematic views, whose errors are then corrected by the Buddha himself.

The prince attempts to identify four objects that represent ultimate possibilities within the material world: the child, cow, sun, and ocean, where a child is the specific object loved most of all. The Buddha rejects all these distinctions. Love is nothing more than self-love or vanity; wealth simply means having some grains of one's own. Both light and water are inferior to the spiritual gifts of wisdom and perception. Thus the view that no love surpasses

⁴² T 99: 2.263b. This source is suggested by the commentary in *SNKBT*.

⁴³ "Gathering of waters" is Skt. *samudra*; Pali *samudda*, a collective body of waters.

one's love for one's children, expressed by the Buddha's interlocutor, is a fallacious one; it is not even a partial truth but at best a step towards recognizing the limitations of any kind of love for material objects or persons, all of which need to be transcended by a higher kind of wisdom. Some scholars, while noting this sutra as a possible source, dismiss it since the quotation is not directly from the Buddha's mouth.⁴⁴ But Okura's use of *mata* 又 can easily be understood as distinguishing this quotation from the previous one, the former a direct quotation and the latter instead a saying associated more loosely with the Buddha. In any case, it is clear from the content of this sentence that it cannot possibly be an authentic statement of the Buddha's meaning, since Buddhist thought is directed at transmuting or even denying ordinary passions like paternal love.

Thus in both cases Okura adopts authentic language from the Buddhist sutras, but deploys it with a significance either orthogonal or fully contradictory to the message of the works from which they derive. There are two ways one might evaluate this method. Perhaps it is an example of the poet's indifference to ideas: Okura admires the iconography of the Buddha's son, and adopts it for his own personal expression, without heeding any of its deeper import. Alternatively, Okura might be intentionally critiquing or satirizing the Buddhist message. In this interpretation he would be writing as a crafty and self-conscious ideologue. But the consistently self-aware and frequently self-negating method of Okura's oeuvre as a whole leads us to a more subtle evaluation of his relationship with his sources. Okura admires Buddhist ideals, as well as Confucian and Daoist one, and he quotes profusely from all three traditions in his writing, but he retains a circumspect distance from their conclusions as well. He refuses to commit himself to any particular religious and philosophical doctrine, using them to frame and enrich his own experience but not to replace it.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Imura, *Man'yōshū zenchū: maki dai go*, 49.

There is an important methodological qualification to be made here. Similar sentiments are expressed in numerous sutras in the Buddhist canon. When unsure of the specific source, we ought to prefer as candidates those sutras we know Okura to have read or had access to, such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, *Vimalakīrti*, or *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* sutras.⁴⁵ The books available in Nara or Tsukushi were limited, and it is not reasonable to assume Okura had access to the whole corpus of texts produced in China up to the contemporary High Tang era.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Okura had actually spent two years in China, so it is equally impossible to prove that he could not have seen any Chinese text produced up through Empress Wu's reign. Moreover, as we will see in the discussion below, it is evident from Okura's writings that he knew certain Chinese sources that are now lost, or preserved only in Dunhuang fragments. They may have been commonplace books for popular use, not primary texts, but they still contained many precious quotations.⁴⁷ Indeed the *Samyuktāgama sūtra* (*Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經), quoted above, was translated by Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (394–468) and is something like a Buddhist commonplace book, consisting of “combined” (Skt. *saṃyukta*; translated as Chinese *za* 雜 “miscellaneous) stories and scriptures. It was certainly translated early enough that Okura might have seen the exact text quoted above. Though we cannot identify Okura's sources with precision, we can be confident of his having read widely, and thus it is reasonable to compare his writings with some sutras or poems from the Chinese textual tradition, even if we cannot be certain he read them in their extant form.

Regarding both Okura's knowledge of sources and the depth of his critique, then, we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt, and allow for the possibility that he is misquoting

⁴⁵ This last, the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra* (Jin guangming zuisheng wang jing 金光明最勝王經, T 665), was also highly influential in early Japan.

⁴⁶ See Kojima Noriyuki's consideration of this issue in *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 45–164.

⁴⁷ See Kojima, *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 114–32, on *leishu* and in particular the *Yiwen leiju*.

intentionally. It is in this light, by contrast with the problematic doctrines of universal compassion, that the succeeding poem takes on new significance. Just after his dual quotations from Buddhist scriptures, Okura presents the following short *chōka* (a long song, but here “long” only relative to the *tanka*, than which it is only two 5-7 clauses longer). Note that, as frequently occurs in Book V, the poem is entirely in *man'yōgana* phonograms that contrast dramatically with the *kanbun* preface (*MYS*, 5.802):⁴⁸

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>uri pameba</i> | Munching on muskmelon ⁴⁹ |
| <i>kwodomo omopoyu</i> | I think of my children; |
| <i>kuri pameba</i> | munching on chestnuts |
| <i>masite sinwopayu</i> | I find myself longing for them. |
| <i>iduku ywori</i> | What place is it |
| <i>kitari-si mono so</i> | that they come from? |
| <i>manakapi ni</i> | They seem to be suspended |
| <i>motona kakarite</i> | right before my eyes |
| <i>yasui si nasanu</i> | so I cannot sleep soundly. |

宇利波米婆 胡藤母意母保由 久利波米婆 麻斯提斯能波由 伊豆久欲利
 枳多利斯物能曾 麻奈迦比爾 母等奈可々利提 夜周伊斯奈佐能

It is highly significant that the very first word appearing after the contemplative preface is “muskmelon” (specifically the *makuwa* melon still popular in Korea and Japan). From the lofty abstractions of universal love and ultimate devotion, Okura abruptly returns to a humble detail. Similarly the verb *pamu* is a mundane one that emphasizes the physical act of eating,

⁴⁸ Given the pronounced difference between the Japanese language in Okura’s time and today, it seems proper to give a reconstruction of the sound values, in addition to the original text in Chinese characters. All reconstructions in this paper are based on *OCOJ* by Frellesvig, et al. Frellesvig reconstructs the *kō-rui* and *otsu-rui* vowel distinctions with diphthongs as follows: *i₁-i*; *i₂-wi*; *e₁-ye*; *e₂-e*; *o₁-wo*; *o₂-o*. This has the virtue of explaining why the distinction was neutralized in front of certain consonants and disappeared abruptly in Heian Japanese. See Frellesvig, *A History of the Japanese Language*, 32.

⁴⁹ There were of course various varieties of melon already in Nara Japan, but this one seems most likely here (*Cucumis melo* var. *makuwa*). See Sekine, *Nara-chō shoku seikatsu no kenkyū*, 64.

in early Japanese literature also used as the verb for eating of animals and birds.⁵⁰ In a feat of literary legerdemain, Okura does not describe his children except indirectly through his mental perception of them.⁵¹

The poem on Okura's children depicts personal experience, summoned into the imagination through the use of concrete details, convincingly conveying Okura's love for his children. The envoy, however, returns us to the broader context, asking how a child compares with material wealth (*MYS*, 5.803):

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>sirwokane mo</i> | Ingots of silver |
| <i>kugane mo tama mo</i> | and gold and precious jewels, |
| <i>nani se-mu ni</i> | how can they compare |
| <i>masar-eru takara</i> | with the surpassing treasure |
| <i>kwo ni sika-me ya mo</i> | of your child? |

銀母 金母玉母 奈爾世武爾 麻佐礼留多可良 古爾斯迦米夜母

The rhetorical question here seems to admit only one answer, that a child is a treasure of special value, incommensurable with gold, silver, or jewels.⁵² At first blush this seems like an assertion that anybody could agree with. But the *gātha* dialogue quoted above affirms that there are indeed treasures that surpass a child in value; and the common Buddhist epithet, the

⁵⁰ See supplementary note in *NKBT* edition, p. 428.

⁵¹ Cf. Okura's poem on Ōtomo no Kumagori 大伴熊凝 (*MYS*, 5.887). At the age of only seventeen, Kumagori drowned on his way to take up a new position at the capital. Okura imagines Kumagori, in the confusion of his death, unsure of which direction he ought to look to say farewell to his mother. The evocative detail is so effective, though, because it no longer matters which way he is facing, and the dramatic irony lies in the speaker's failure to recognize the categorical opposition of the cardinal directions no longer applies to him.

⁵² David Lurie suggests that "the materiality of the precious objects—silver, gold, and jewels—is emphasized by the use of three logographs" (Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*, 296). But that may not be the emphasis intended by Okura; see discussion of the Three Jewels below.

Three Jewels—normally referring to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha—are a specific example of “precious jewels” deserving of greater admiration than one’s own child. The fact that Okura refers to three precious things might be even be considered an oblique suggestion of those Three Jewels.

The question posed in this tanka is not entirely rhetorical, and may also contain a hint of passages in the Buddhist sutras that make precisely this comparison. For instance, in the *Sutra on Past and Present Karma* (Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing 過去現在因果經), the historical Buddha’s own father, the king Śuddhodana, laments that his son has abandoned his family and his patrimony to perfect himself with religious devotions. He concludes: “How unfortunate I am to survive while I have lost my own son who was such a precious treasure” 我今薄福，生失如此珍寶之子。⁵³ Needless to say, from the point of view of the sutra as a whole, not to mention Buddhist doctrine in general, Śuddhodana’s grief is unwarranted. His son is about to go on to relieve not just himself but all sentient beings from the pointless suffering of *samsāra*. But it is part of the inherent range and literary subtlety of the Buddhist sutras that they allot some space for the Buddha’s own father’s perspective, and distress at the interruption of the royal succession, in the face of the universe-spanning recognition that is to come. The sutras illuminate the agony of losing one’s own jewel-like child, all the while recognizing the necessity of this sacrifice to attain the superior jewel of the dharma. Thus Okura’s poem might be seen as reflecting a critique of Buddhist doctrine that is also possible within the Buddhist tradition itself.

There is no historical evidence to help us determine exactly which children the poem refers to. However, the Buddhist references lead the reader naturally to understand the poem in context of mortality, as a recollection of a child or children who are already deceased. This hypothesis is reasonable given the context of the poem within Book V of the *Man’yōshū*.

⁵³ T 189: 3.639a. This comparison is suggested in the *SNKBT* edition.

This work belongs, together with “Lamenting How Difficult It Is to Stay in the World” and the “Song for Dispelling Deluded Passions,” to the “Kama Trilogy,” which seen as a coherent statement on duty, familial love, and mortality. Thus Okura’s poem on children could be building up to the more explicit statement on impermanence and death in the next poem, and also prefigures the series of elegies and poems on the hardships of poverty and old age that follow in the final section of Book V.

In this context it is not out of place to treat “Song of Longing for My Children” as a eulogy, or at least a contemplation of mortality. The rhetorical question can be phrased in other ways: who would compare a child to gold and silver and jewels, when the latter endure indefinitely, while children are fragile and easily lost? How can you compare these two kinds of treasures when the pain of losing a child is truly unbearable, as one can see from the case of the Buddha’s own father? Yet the *chōka* revolves ultimately around that much simpler and most unforgettable image of Okura recalling his children while munching on muskmelon. Okura’s work paradoxically relies on a Buddhist framework in order to remind us that the most intense, inwardmost human emotions—paternal love and loss—can not be eully explained away even by the Buddha’s teachings.

“Condoling Myself for Dire Illness”

Okura’s engagement with Daoist doctrines and practices is equally visible in his work. He sympathizes with the Daoist ambition for extending life, while also posing objections to the ultimate validity of Daoist methods and assumptions. Indeed, the longest of Okura’s compositions by far is the *kanbun* essay “Condoling Myself for Dire Illness,” which deals extensively with Daoist methods for prolonging life, and employs various quotations from the

Baopuzi 抱朴子 and related texts.⁵⁴ The *Baopuzi* of Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) borrows from the theory of the ineffable way that can be found in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, but adapts this theory in the service of the practical pursuit of immortality.⁵⁵ “Condoling Myself for Dire Illness” is, among other things, Okura’s record of how he himself has attempted to put into practice the doctrines of the *Baopuzi*, as he has found them through various popularizations. This long essay is a valuable case study in the early reception of Daoism in Nara-era Japan, but is particularly interesting because of Okura’s critical response both to Daoist practices and to their theoretical assumptions, conveyed both through pastiche of earlier texts and through autobiographical musings of his own.⁵⁶

The genre of this long composition in Chinese prose is something of a hybrid. On one hand, the title recalls Tao Yuanming’s “Funerary Offering for Myself” 自祭文.⁵⁷ But that piece is actually composed in strict tetrasyllabic meter and rhyme (like other medieval Chinese “offering texts”), while Okura’s composition is prose in a flexible rhythm, with only occasional parallelism. The inspiration of Pan Yue’s 潘岳 (247–300) many elegiac works should also be noted, particularly “Lamenting the Eternally Departed” 哀永逝文, but that again is a poem in the *sao* 騷 mode of the *Chuci* 楚辭 anthology.⁵⁸ Okura also seems to draw inspiration from popular Buddhist genres like the prayer text (*ganmon* 願文; Ch. *yuanwen*), which were likewise in a relatively free meter, and were also composed not just in a funerary mode but also as prayers for recovery from illness.⁵⁹ Overall it reads like a kind of diary, taking time to jot down useful facts even when they are incidental to the key message.

⁵⁴ After *MYS*, 5.896. The illness might also be termed “chronic.”

⁵⁵ See survey in Robinet, *Histoire du taoïsme*, 88–96.

⁵⁶ On its value for the history of Japanese Daoism, see Fukunaga’s penetrating comments in *Dōkyō to Nihon bunka*, 83–86.

⁵⁷ See *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, 7.555–56.

⁵⁸ *Wen xuan*, 57.2484–86.

⁵⁹ On this topic see Wang, “Okura no jussaku to Tonkō ganmon,” esp. pp. 191–203.

Okura's composition is distinguished by its startling critiques of various dogmatic responses to mortality. The long essay consistently employs isocolon to maintain its rhythm and direction, relentlessly reasserting in different words the same central message: no belief system, no deity, no elixir can resist death.⁶⁰ This forms the core of the piece, which conveys a consistent emotional effect in spite of other devices, particularly Okura's autocommentary, as well as quotations and allusions in both the main text and commentary, that distract from that primary message. Okura's own comments and explanations follow most of the independent clauses of the piece and sometimes even interrupt his own thoughts halfway. In the original manuscripts these are presented in a double columns of smaller print. So as to simulate the effect in the translation, I have marked them in brackets and used a smaller font.

The function of the commentary is at first unclear. Some of the points that Okura explains are obvious from the main text, while other notes add irrelevant background details. Modern editions of the *Man'yōshū* mention that Okura seems to be imitating the practice of Chinese authors, but in fact the autocommentary is quite rare in the textual tradition up to the Tang. One prominent example of Xie Lingyun's 謝靈運 (385–433) commentary to his own lengthy and difficult "Rhapsody on Dwelling in the Mountains" 山居賦.⁶¹ By contrast, Okura's annotations tend to provide extraneous comment not directly necessary to understanding the piece. Okura's autocommentary contributes to the multilayered effect of the whole composition, with the main text and commentary offering distinct comments on the topic of each section. It is one more means of expression for Okura's eclectic approach to his sources.

In the translation below the paragraphs are numbered following the *SNKBT* edition of *MYS*.

⁶⁰ Murayama provides a helpful diagram of the structure (*Yamanoue no Okura no kenkyū*, 125–29).

⁶¹ *Song shu*, 67.1754–72.

Condoling Myself for Dire Illness 沈痾自哀文

I. When I reflect how those who hunt for their food day and night upon mountain and plain continue to pass their lives without coming upon disaster; [This refers to all those who wield bow and arrow as profession, and do not evade the Six Days of Purification,⁶² but slaughter and consume all the birds and beasts they come upon, regardless of whether they are large or small, bearing child or not.] and even those who fish in the rivers and seas from dusk to dawn may still find blessing and good fortune, though they are mere laymen; [Fishermen and divers each have their own occupation: men taking up bamboo poles in their hands, and skillfully fishing under the waves; women strapping on chiseling tools and baskets to capture the shellfish at the bottoms of pools.] yet how much moreso one such as myself, who since leaving the womb up to the present day have been intent on cultivating good works, and without any intention to perform evil. [This means that I heard the doctrine of “not creating any of the various evils, but serving and acting on the various virtues.”] For this reason I have paid devotion to the Three Jewels, and not a day has passed that I did not exert myself for them.⁶³ [Reciting sutras daily, and expressing my repentance and regret.] I also revered and honored the hundred gods, and rare has been the night I omitted them. [This refers to revering and praying to the various gods of Heaven and Earth.] Oh alas, how ashamed am I! What sin did I commit, that I now suffer from this awful illness? [This means that, not knowing what sin I committed in the past, or if it was in some previous life, I wonder what crime I committed that brought this illness upon me.]

竊以、朝夕佃食山野者、猶無災害而得度世、【調、常執弓箭、不避六齋、所值禽獸、不論大小、孕及不孕、並皆殺食、以此為業者也。】晝夜釣漁河海者、尚有慶福而全經俗。【調漁夫、潛女、各有所勤、男者手把竹竿能釣波浪之上、女者腰帶鑿籠潛採深潭之底者也】況乎我從胎生迄于今日、自有修善之志、曾無作惡之心。【調聞諸惡莫作、諸善奉行之教也】所以禮拜三寶、無日不勤、【每日誦經、發露懺悔也】敬重百神、鮮夜有關。【調敬拜天地諸神等也】嗟乎媿哉、我犯何罪、遭此重疾。【調未知過去所造之罪、若是現前所犯之過。無犯罪過、何獲此病乎】

II. Since I first succumbed to this dire illness, months and years have passed. [This means over ten years.] Now my years number seventy-four, the hair on my temples

⁶² The six days of the month when lay believers were supposed to fast and otherwise purify themselves (Skt. *poṣadha*).

⁶³ The Three Jewels are the three primary components of the Buddhist world: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha (the community of monks and nuns).

is specked with white, and the vigor of my muscles is dilapidated and depleted. It is not just because I have grown old, but further because of this disease. As the proverbs say, it is like “pouring salt into a painful wound, chopping the end from a short log.”⁶⁴ My four limbs are immobile, my hundred joints wracked with pain, my whole body overwhelmingly heavy, just as if bearing the weight of a stone, the weight of a ton. [Twenty-four drams make one ounce; sixteen ounces make up one pound; thirty pounds make up one stone; four stone make up one ton; altogether the weight of one ton is one-hundred twenty pounds.]⁶⁵ Like one trying to stand in a waterfall,⁶⁶ resembling a bird with broken wing, when I try to walk leaning on a cane, I am like a hobbled mule.

初沈痾已來、年月稍多。【謂經十餘年也】是時七十有四、鬢髮斑白、筋力尪羸。不但年老、復加斯病。諺曰、痛瘡灌鹽，短材截端、此之。四支不動、百節皆疼、身體太重、猶負鈞石。【廿四銖為一兩、十六兩為一斤、卅斤為一鈞、四鈞為石、合一百廿斤也】懸布欲立、如折翼之鳥、倚杖且步、比跛足之驢。

III. Now my body is consumed by the mundane, and my heart too is laden with the world's dust. Seeking to know of the disasters that await and the curses that are hidden from me, I went to visit all the houses of the tortoise-shell diviners and the chambers of the shamans and priests. Not knowing whether they were true or false I nonetheless followed all their teachings. I made every offering of votive silks, every prayer and devotion. But my suffering only increased, and was not alleviated at all. I have heard that there were many excellent healers in previous ages, who healed the ailments and infirmities of the people: Yu Fu,⁶⁷ Bian Que,⁶⁸ Hua Tuo,⁶⁹ Healers He

⁶⁴ The former proverb also appears in Okura's "Body Aged and Grievously Ill, Suffering Pain and Hardship for Years, I Long for My Children" (*MYS*, 5.897); the latter proverb also appears in the "Dialogue on Poverty" (*MYS*, 5.892, see below). The conjunction of the two suggests how this work is, among other things, a kind of commonplace book for Okura.

⁶⁵ This is a free translation converting the ancient Chinese weights (銖為一兩、十六兩為一斤、卅斤為一鈞、四鈞為石) into English terms, even though this makes the calculation inaccurate. The information given in the note is similar to the explanation in *Huainanzi*. See *Huainan honglie jijie*, 3.139–40.

⁶⁶ *Kenbu* 懸布 has traditionally been understood as a piece of silk, but the interpretation of "waterfall" makes the image more dramatic and suitable to Okura's style. The earliest usage for this phrase cited in the *Hanyu da cidian* is by Du You 杜佑 (735–812), already later than Okura, but certainly demonstrating that this usage was possible during the Tang.

⁶⁷ While some of the doctors in this list were famous in medieval China, others are more obscure. Yu Fu 榆柎 was a legendary doctor from the remote antiquity of the Yellow Emperor. He is mentioned in the subcommentary to the *Zhouli* 周禮 by Jia Gongyan 賈公彥 (fl. 650). See *Zhouli zhushu*, 5.6b.

⁶⁸ Bian Que 扁鵲 was a famous master of sphygmology. See his biography in *Shiji*, 105.2785–94.

and Huan of Qin,⁷⁰ Ge Zhichuan,⁷¹ Hermit Tao,⁷² Zhang Zhongjing,⁷³ and their ilk. It is said that if any of these fine healers were alive today, they could cure any illness at all. [Bian Que's surname was Qin, his style name Yueren. He was from Bohai commandery. He would slice open the chest, pull out the heart, and replace it, while applying divine medicines, so that the patient would wake up feeling completely healthy. Hua Tuo's style name was Yuanhua, and he was a man of Qiao in the territory of Pei.⁷⁴ If someone came to him with a severe, lingering, or dire illness, he would carve open the intestines and remove its cause. Sewing up the wound and applying an ointment, in four or five days the patient would be cured.] Though I wait in longing for healers such as these, I dare not hope to be treated by such men. Should I find a sagely healer and divine remedies, I would pray that he could slice and carve open my five internal organs, cut away my hundred ailments, and reach into the innermost place in my body between heart and diaphragm.⁷⁵ ["The kwō is the diaphragm, the kō the place beneath the heart."⁷⁶ "There is no way to attack this place, no means by which to reach it, no medicine can cure it."⁷⁷] I would hope they could reveal the place where the

⁶⁹ Hua Tuo 華佗 (d. 207 CE) has a biography in *Hou Han shu*, 82B.2736–41.

⁷⁰ He and Huan are two doctors both from the state of Qin. They are mentioned together in the *Baopuzi*, along with Yu Fu and Bian Que (see *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 5.101). Yi He 醫和 (Healer He; ca. 6th c. BCE) is mentioned in *Guoyu*, 14.9b. He has no surname other than Yi, "Healer." Yi Huan 醫緩 (fl. 581 BCE) is mentioned in the *Zuozhuan*, Duke Cheng, year 10 (see *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 849). He is involved in the story about the Duke of Jin interpreting the cause of his illness as two young boys seen in a dream, a passage that provides the source to several images to follow..

⁷¹ Ge Zhichuan is Ge Hong, author of the *Baopuzi*.

⁷² Tao is the alchemist and healer Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (452–536), a prolific author influential in later Daoism.

⁷³ Zhang Ji 張機, style name Zhongjing 仲景, was a famous healer from the Eastern Han. He is mentioned in *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 5.112.

⁷⁴ That is, Qiao 譙 in Peiguo 沛國 (modern Bo 亳 county, Anhui), also the home of Cao Cao.

⁷⁵ The *kōkwō* 膏肓 was proverbially said to be the hardest place for medicines to reach. This passage, along with the note below, is the first text provided in the Yi 醫 "Medicine" entry in the *Yiwen leiju*, 76.1291–92.

⁷⁶ This explanation is given by Du Yu 杜預 in the commentary to the *Zuozhuan* passage cited in the following note.

⁷⁷ This is again a quotation from the *Zuozhuan* story of the Duke of Jin and the two boys. Duke Jing 景 was gravely ill and awaiting a master healer. In the meantime he dreamt that his illness was caused by two young boys inside his body, who hid in this innermost, unattainable location so that no doctor could reach them.

Two Youths had gone into hiding. [When Duke Jing of Jin was sick, the healer Huan from Qin was supposed to see him but did not return. It was said that he had been killed by a demon.⁷⁸] 吾以身已穿俗、心亦累塵、欲知禍之所伏、崇之所隱、龜卜之門、巫祝之室、無不往問。若實、若妄、隨其所教、奉幣帛、無不祈禱。然而彌有增苦、曾無減差。吾聞、前代多有良醫、救療蒼生病患。至若榆柎、扁鵲、華佗、秦和、緩、葛稚川、陶隱居、張仲景等、皆是在世良醫、無不除愈也。【扁鵲、姓秦、字越人、勃海郡人也。割胸採心、易而置之、投以神藥、即寤如平也。華佗、字元他、沛國譙人也。沈重者在內者、剖腸取病、縫復摩膏四五日差定】 追望件醫、非敢所及。若逢聖醫神藥者、仰願、割剝五藏、抄採百病、尋達膏肓之隩處、【盲鬲也、心下為膏。攻之不可、達之不及、藥不至焉】 欲顯二豎之逃匿。【謂、晉景公疾、秦醫、緩視而還者、可謂為鬼所殺也】

IV. The ultimate tragedy is when the root of vitality is extinguished and one's Heaven-allotted years are finished. [Whether a sage or hero, for all those who possess souls, none is spared this fate.] How much moreso when one is not yet halfway through the register of life, to be wantonly murdered by a demon, or for one of youthful countenance to be struck down by disease. What calamity is there in the world that is grosser than this? [It is said that: The former prefect of Guanping, Xu Xuanfang of Bohai, had a daughter who died at the age of eighteen. Her soul said to Feng Mazi, "Examining my register of life, I ought to have a lifespan of over eighty years. But now it is four years since I was murdered wantonly by a demon." Then, meeting Feng Mazi, she was restored to life. In the Inner Teachings it is said that: "People in the great continent of Jambudvīpa live to one hundred twenty years of age."⁷⁹ Considering this scrupulously, it does not mean that people are certainly incapable of surpassing this age. Thus the *Sutra of Extending Longevity* says: "There was a monk named Nanda. As he was approaching the end of his life, he begged the Buddha for longevity, and his life was extended eighteen years."⁸⁰ Only those who perform meritorious deeds can last as long as Heaven and Earth. Whether one is long-lived or suffers an untimely death is determined by karma from previous lives. Depending on whether it is long or short one may already be halfway though, and though not yet having completed the proper count of years, already be on the verge of death. Thus it is said, "not yet halfway." Summoned Scholar Ren once said, "Disease enters through the mouth,

⁷⁸ The *Zuozhuan* itself says simply that he died suddenly while in the privy.

⁷⁹ This statement can be found in the *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, where it is identified as a quotation from the *Dīrghāgama* (Chang ahan jing 長阿含經). See T 2122: 53.381c.

⁸⁰ This apocryphal sutra (more properly, a sutra probably composed in China) appears in numerous versions in the Dunhuang materials. The wording here is very close to that of P. 2171 (also 2289, 2374, and 3110), whose full title is *Fo shuo yan shouming jing* 佛說延壽命經. Incidentally, in that text Nanda extends his life with the assistance of seventeen divinities, named below in the same text.

so the proper gentleman restricts what he drinks or eats.”⁸¹ According to this view, when people suffer from serious illness, it is not necessarily the fault of a demon or ghost. The wide-ranging doctrines of the various medical masters, the valuable admonition against imbibing or consuming, as well as the dullness of human nature that makes it difficult to put into practice what is easily known: these three things have long since occupied my eyes and filled my ears. As the *Baopuzi* states: “It is only because people do not know precisely when they will die that they do not worry. If they knew that they were able to take on wings and extend their mortal lives, they would certainly do so.” From this point of view, if my disease had been caused merely by eating and drinking, then wouldn’t I be capable of curing it myself?

命根盡、終其天下、尚為哀。【聖人賢者、一切含靈、誰免此道乎】何況、生錄未半、為鬼狂殺、顏色壯年、為病橫困者乎。在世大患、孰甚于此。【志恠記云、廣平前大守、北海徐玄方之女、年十八歲而死。其靈謂馮馬子曰、案我生錄、當壽八十餘歲。今為妖鬼所狂殺、已經四年。此遇馮馬子、乃得更活、是也。內教云、瞻浮州人壽百二十歲。謹案、此數非必不得過此。故、壽延經云、有比丘、名曰難達。臨命終時、詣佛請壽、則延十八年。但善為者天地相畢。其壽夭者業報所招、隨其脩短而為半也。未盈斯竿而、遽死去。故曰未半也。任徵君曰、病從口入。故、君子節其飲食。由斯言之、人遇疾病、不必妖鬼。夫、醫方諸家之廣說、飲食禁忌之厚訓、知易行難之鈍情、三者、盈目滿耳由來久矣。抱朴子曰、人但、不知其當死之日故不憂耳。若誠知剗剗可得延期者、必將為之。以此而觀、乃知、我病蓋斯飲食所招而、不能自治者乎也】

V. The *Selected Sayings of Master Bo* states: “We reflect back on life and also exert ourselves forward to attain longevity. For life is what is desirable; death is what is horrible.” The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is called life. Thus a dead man is not even as good as a rat. Suppose you were once a nobleman: even though you accumulated a mountain of gold in life, when your breath is extinguished, who will still consider you wealthy? You may have prestige and power as vast as the ocean, but who will consider you his superior?⁸² *Roaming in the Grottoes of the Immortals* also says: “Those who reside below in the Nine Springs are not worth a single ingot of silver.”⁸³ Confucius said: “The bodily form bestowed by Heaven cannot be changed; the lifespan bestowed by Destiny you cannot pray to extend.” [This statement can be found in Master Guigu’s book on evaluation of persons.] Thus we can recognize how extremely valuable and exceedingly precious is life. Though I try to speak of it my

⁸¹ See discussion of this quotation below.

⁸² These lines are an elaboration of *Baopuzi*, as quoted in *Taiping yulan*, 911.5a. But note that in the original context, the nobleman and the mouse are used as vehicles of a larger comparison. See discussion below.

⁸³ For the details of this adaptation of *Youxianku*, see discussion below.

speech is exhausted, and what more can I say? Though I try to ponder it my ponderings fail, and how could I ponder it further?

帛公略說曰、伏思自勵、以斯長生。々可貪也。死可畏也。天地之大德曰生。故死人不及生鼠。雖為王侯一日絕氣、積金如山、誰為富哉。威勢如海、誰為貴哉。遊仙窟曰、九泉下人、一錢不直。孔子曰、受之於天、不可變易者形也。受之於命、不可請益者也。【見鬼谷先生相人書】故、知、生之極貴、命之至重。欲言々窮、何以言之。欲慮々絕、何由慮之。

VI. After all, no matter whether a man is wise or foolish, and no matter whether some past age or the present time, all men must sigh and lament upon it. The months and years race past us, not tarrying day or night. [Zengzi said: “What departs and does not return is the years.”⁸⁴ Xuanni’s lament overlooking the river was the same.⁸⁵] Senility and sickness press upon us, encroaching further from dawn to dusk. The enjoyment and bliss of one era are not yet gone from one’s seat, [Emperor Wen of Wei wrote in his poem lamenting the worthies of his age: “Night not yet ended in the West Garden, / Dust suddenly rises on Northern Hillock.”⁸⁶] the sorrows and pain of a millennium continue beyond one’s own place. [As the Old Poem says, “A man’s life does not last one hundred years, / Why concern yourself with the anxieties of a millennium?”⁸⁷]

惟以、人無賢愚、世無古今、咸悉嗟歎。歲月競流、晝夜不息。【曾子曰、往而不反者 年也。宣尼臨川之歎亦是矣也】老疾相催、朝夕侵動。一代權樂未盡席前、【魏文惜時賢詩曰、未盡西苑夜、劇作北望塵也】千年愁苦更繼坐後。【古詩云、人生不滿百、何懷千年憂美】

VII. Perhaps every variety of living being must perish, and each strives not to lose its life. Thus the Daoists and the masters of arcane methods bear cinnabar scriptures with them into the celebrated mountains, compound elixirs to cultivate their vitality and ease their spirits, all in pursuit of longevity. As *Baopuzi* states: “*Shennong*

⁸⁴ Confucius’ disciple Zeng Shen 曾參. But this quotation does not seem to appear in extant Confucian texts.

⁸⁵ Xuanni 宣尼 is an honorific name for Confucius. This is an allusion to Confucius’ famous lament in *Analects* 9/16.

⁸⁶ This memorable couplet, attributed by Okura to a poem by Cao Pi 曹丕, does not appear in his extant works. For his other extant poems, see Lu Qinli, *Xian-Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 389–406.

⁸⁷ Okura’s quotation varies slightly from the *Wen xuan* text (*Wen xuan*, 29.1349). But the Old Poems often vary in wording in quotations in different texts.

explains: ‘One must be cured of the hundred ailments to attain longevity.’⁸⁸ And Lord Bo also states: ‘Life is a good thing; death an odious one.’⁸⁹ If we all have the misfortune not to attain longevity, then can one consider blessed even those free from illness or ailment throughout their lives? Now I am so tormented by illness that I can neither lie or sit. I cannot tell what to do, no matter how I shift myself, turning to face east or west. All of the most exceedingly unfortunate things have come upon me. It is said: ‘What man prays for, Heaven will accommodate.’⁹⁰ If that is true, then I look upwards and pray for all my ailments to be cured and to return to health. How mortifying it is to compare oneself with a rat! [See above.]

若夫群生品類、莫不皆以有盡之身、並求無窮之命。所以、道人方士自負丹經、入於名山而合藥之者、養性怡神、以求長生。抱朴子曰、神農云、百病不愈、安得長生。帛公又曰、生好物也、死惡物也。若不幸而不得長生者、猶以生涯無病患者、為福大哉。今吾為病見惱、不得臥坐。向東向西莫知所為。無福至甚、惣集于我。人願天從。如有實者、仰願、頓除此病、賴得如平。以鼠為喻、豈不愧乎。【已見上也】

The text defies summary, but through each section examines the specter of death through a combination of pathos, sentimentality, scholarship, and wit. Okura is resistant to all the lessons of the various religious practices and ideological beliefs that he quotes in considerably detail, leading to a paradoxical conclusion: we have no choice but to pray for aid of a variety not likely to be forthcoming, and to strive to equal the good fortune of a rat. The method throughout is idiosyncratic and eclectic, frequently diverted by pedantic whim or imagistic association rather than strict argument. In the first section Okura asks why people who strive to follow all the precepts of religion still suffer from illness and death. As usual,

⁸⁸ The text here is similar to *Baopuzi* (see *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 13.222). Shennong was one of the Five Emperors of antiquity, a legendary hero said to have invented agriculture. But in medieval China a text on medicinal herbs was also attributed to him, the *Shennong bencao* 神農本草, which is mentioned in the ‘Jingji zhi’ 經籍志 (Treatise on classics and documents) in the *Sui shu*, 34.1040.

⁸⁹ A direct quotation from *Baopuzi* (see *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 4.229).

⁹⁰ An abbreviated version of a sentence in the *Book of Documents*: ‘Heaven takes pity on man. What man desires, Heaven will certainly accommodate’ 天矜于民，民之所欲，天必從之。 See *Shangshu zhengyi*, 11.7a.

though, he begins not from the generality but from the telling specific case of hunters and fishermen who nonetheless attain happiness and longevity.⁹¹ Okura's orientation in this passage is primarily Buddhist, as made clear by his reference to the "Three Jewels," but it also encompasses the "hundred gods," i.e. *kami*, of Japan.

The second section turns to Okura's illness, giving us his age of 74.⁹² There are two charmingly irrelevant bits of pedantry here as well that communicate something of Okura's personality. First, the conjunction of two proverbs, "pouring salt into a painful wound, chopping the end from a short log"—both of which Okura uses elsewhere in his writings—suggests that this piece may have served as something of a commonplace book for Okura, collecting various suggestive quotations and stories. This distinguishes it immediately from the autocommentary of Xie Lingyun, for instance, and has to be taken into consideration when evaluating the curious citations. Second, the calculation on weights here gives a particularly tragicomic encapsulation of the essay's style, combining pseudo-scholarship with very real autobiography. The weight in the essay is given merely as an indication of Okura's physical sensation of heaviness, merely naming the *kin* 鈞 and *seki* 石 for rhetorical effect. The enumeration of measures is pointless except in how it balances and even self-satirizes the pathos of the main text. Thus the opening two sections place us squarely in Okura's mental universe, in which Buddhist devotion goes unrewarded, and erudition finds itself the butt of experience's ridicule.

⁹¹ As noted, Xie Lingyun's "Rhapsody on Dwelling in the Mountains" is one of the few models for autocommentary available to Okura, so it is interesting to note that that poem also discusses the relation between hunting and longevity. After a passage in which Xie says he has refrained from hunting or fishing, his commentary states: "From youth I have not killed, so that I may attain to white-headed [longevity]" 自少不殺，至乎白首 (*Song shu*, 67.1764).

⁹² This has been used to determine his lifespan, but in fact it is quite possible that he continued to live on well past the composition of this essay.

The third section opens with Okura's unforgettable admission that he has sought the help of every doctor, magician, and outright quack he could find: "Not knowing whether they were true or false I nonetheless followed all their instructions." This includes making every kind of votive offering and prayer that was suggested to him. Continuing along the same lines, Okura discusses famous healers from China, and regrets that none is available to cure his disease. The list of healers is a remarkable conjunction of names from disparate texts: though various subsets of this list do appear in sources like the *Baopuzi* and *Yiwen leiju*, these texts do not include all the doctors named here.⁹³ In the conclusion here, Okura alludes to a curious story of dream and disease in the *Zuozhuan*, concluding with the offhand remark: "It was said that he was killed by a demon." This has no obvious relevance here, but contributes to an overall impression of the random, meaningless nature of existence.

The demon also prepares for the next section, where the threat of being killed wantonly by a demon appears both in the main text and in another story quoted in the commentary. Here its significance becomes clearer. In spite of all our efforts to preserve our lives by staying healthy and following the precepts of the sages, we have no way to stave off the random depredations of idle demons. The commentary then goes into a kind of frenzy of citation, as if the arbitrary death and resurrection of the Feng Mazi story has driven it insane. There follow somewhat perplexing quotations from Buddhist sutras about the possibility of extending one's life. Okura quotes the apocryphal *Sutra of Extending Longevity*, which offers a Daoist spin on traditional Buddhist thought, seeking to extend life rather than escape from its torments.

⁹³ Kojima points out that all but Ge Hong himself (the author of the *Baopuzi*) and Tao Hongjing, who lived two centuries after Ge Hong, appear in the fifth *juan* of the *Baopuzi* (Kojima, *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 1000). Yet the names all appear in different order and in rather different forms: for instance, Hua Tuo appears in the same chapter but separately from the others. So even if the *Baopuzi* was a primary source for Okura, of which there can be little doubt, Okura's list is adapted and cannot be considered a direct quotation.

The fourth section also includes the puzzling quotation: “Summoned Scholar Ren once said, ‘Disease enters through the mouth, so the proper gentleman restricts what he drinks or eats.’” Ren has been identified as either Ren Tang 任棠 or Ren An 任安 (124–202), both from the Eastern Han dynasty, but is more likely to be Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), who compiled a number of miscellaneous texts that are lost.⁹⁴ Until recently the only source for Okura’s quotation seemed to be Fu Xuan’s 傅玄 (217–278) (fragmentary) “Inscription on the Mouth” 口銘, which states that “disease enters via the mouth while ruin appears via the mouth” 病從口入禍從口出.⁹⁵ A recent discovery sheds some new light on the problem, however. There is a very similar line in a moralizing commonplace book *Lizhong jiechao* 勵忠節鈔, long lost but preserved in numerous fragments in Dunhuang.⁹⁶ Thus Okura seems to have had access to numerous books that are not part of the transmitted record, of which we only have tantalizing hints thanks to the Dunhuang discoveries. The *Lizhong jiechao* has an essentially Confucian orientation, but Okura concludes by critiquing this idea from a Daoist perspective, quoting *Baopuzi* as affirming our ability to extend our own life through certain arcane practices. The disease cannot have been caused by something so simple as eating and drinking, since in that case Okura ought to be able to cure it himself through fasting. This medley of quotations and stories concludes with a dose of skepticism directed at all these books of wisdom.

The fifth section comments on various Daoist responses to death. Again, Okura’s source has not survived intact, but seems to be a popularization of the *Baopuzi* and other

⁹⁴ E.g.: *Zazhuan* 雜傳, originally in 147 fascicles, and recorded as having 36 fascicles in the Sui dynasties, but already lost by the time of the commentary (Tang?). See *Sui shu*, “Jingji zhi,” 33.976. Cf. the discussion of the problem of evaluating Ren Fang’s rumored authorship of another text in Brightwell, “Discursive Flights.”

⁹⁵ *Taiping yulan*, 367.9b.

⁹⁶ See Bian, “Yamanoue no Okura to ‘Nin shōkun,’” citing Qu, *Dunhuang xieben leishu Lizhong jiechao yanjiu*, 370.

Daoist texts called the *Bogong lüeshuo* 伯公略說. Okura here cites a number of texts affirming the value of life over death, including the most memorable one, that a dead human is not worth even as much as a live rat. The lack of punctuation in the original text leaves it unclear to whom Okura is attributing this statement, but it is quoted in the *Taiping yulan* and there attributed to *Baopuzi*, so we can speculate that Okura might have found it in the *Bogong lüeshuo* or some variant edition of *Baopuzi* itself. This section also cites the intriguing *Guigu xiansheng xiangren shu* 鬼谷先生相人書, a popular physiognomy text borrowing the name of Warring States-era rhetorician Guiguzi 鬼谷子.⁹⁷ This is another example of substantial corpus of texts to which Okura, and perhaps the average Tang reader, had access to, but later readers lost entirely until the Dunhuang caves were opened in 1907.

By the standards of elite literary composition in imperial China, Okura's introduction of these popular books would have seemed vulgar and inept, but for matters of life and death, these were doubtless some of the most apposite sources at hand.⁹⁸ Even more startling is the abrupt appearance of the *Roaming in the Grottoes of the Immortals*. Though this book was famously well-received in eighth-century Japan, it still seems out-of-place here.⁹⁹ Okura quotes the following sentence which does indeed look like it could be a common Chinese idiom: "Those who reside below in the Nine Springs are not worth a single ingot of silver."

⁹⁷ A philosophical text *Guiguzi* is also attributed to him. Though this book does not survive, but similar works of physiognomy attributed to Xu Fu 許負 (Western Han era) have been recovered from Dunhuang, of which the most complete is C117 (IOL Ch.87.xvi.5) *verso*. See Despeux, "Physiognomonie," 550–51, for a summary of this text; cf. Kanda, "Man'yōshū no kokkaku to natta kanseki," 42.

⁹⁸ Kanda Kiichirō 神田喜一郎 (1897–1984) took this point of view (Kanda, "Man'yōshū no kokkaku to natta kanseki"), but it is surely wrong to judge Okura's works by standards of propriety that obviously would have meant nothing to him. Cf. Yoshikawa Kōjirō's interesting comments in "*Man'yōshū no kanbun*."

⁹⁹ Kojima identifies a number of *MYS* texts that are influenced simultaneously by the *Wen xuan* and *Youxianku*, but this is a more natural conjunction, since *Youxianku* is much influenced by the parallel style of the *Wen xuan*, and the latter does contain a number of pieces that mention passionate rendezvous. See Kojima, *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 1021–54.

The source, though, says something dramatically different; Tenth Maid is flirting with the visitor and says, “You may believe that I’m *one of those who reside below in the Nine Springs*, and tomorrow when you’re in a better place, you’ll say I’m *not worth a single ingot of silver*” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁰ The process of adaptation here is a clever rearranging of the text to mean something utterly different and suitable to Okura’s purpose. This case is such an extreme misrepresentation of the source text, in fact, that one is tempted to think we have here simply a joke. One might even wonder if Okura’s real point here is to comment facetiously on those scholars who find it necessary to cite chapter and verse for the claim that human life is precious. More positively, it is another case of how Okura finds himself sifting through the disparate texts available to him for valuable expressions and points of view, but without necessarily affirming them, even at the level of the individual sentence.

The sixth section places Okura’s personal concerns in context of the law of mutability, much emphasized throughout his works. Here Okura quotes a splendid Chinese couplet not preserved in Chinese transmitted texts. The couplet is attributed, perhaps correctly, to Cao Pi, founding emperor of the Wei dynasty after his father Cao Cao had won control of northern China:

未盡西苑夜 Night not yet ended in the West Garden,
劇作北望塵 Dust suddenly rises on Northern Hillock.

This couplet is a wonderful encapsulation of the elegiac mood of the late Jian’an period, following the epidemic of 217 that killed off several of its great writers. During the heyday of the “Seven Masters of Jian’an,” the Cao princes and their coterie of writers would go on

¹⁰⁰ For original text see Zhang Zhuo 張騫 (658–730), *Youxianku jiaozhu*, 17. Imura points out the transformation here (*Man’yōshū zenchū: maki dai go*, 226).

excursions around the capital of Ye 鄴, and exchange poems at festive gatherings.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Cao Pi's critical essay "Lun wen" 論文 would go on to play a central role in literary theorizing of the ninth-century Heian court.¹⁰² Though it is possible that Okura's attribution is mistaken, it is also conceivable that he had seen writings or even an entire collection of Cao Pi's writings that is no longer extant.¹⁰³ Evoking a scene of literary brilliance and historical reflection from a half a millennium before in China, Okura reflects on the transience of his own era in a splendid moment of intertextual reminiscence, not to mention a concise refutation of the modern fiction that literature is divided into discrete national traditions.

In the final section, Okura returns to *Baopuzi*, source in various forms of so many of the quotations in the essay. One might imagine he will ultimately declare his hope that some Daoist elixir or health regimen will rid him of illness and restore him to health. Instead, though, with a classical quotation affirming the validity of prayer, he makes one more prayer to the deities—perhaps the Medicine Buddha, or the *kami* of the mountains and rivers—and concludes with a scornful rejection of the "live rat" analogy. In a final stroke of self-reflexivity, the essay concludes with a note referring back to the earlier mention of the "live rat." This final, unnecessary note seems again to indicate the satirical element in the commentary. Okura ruefully mocks his own tendency to take refuge in texts. In the struggle between life and death, ultimately all we can do is surrender to higher powers.

"Condoling Myself for Dire Illness" is not a tightly argued, polemical piece; to the contrary, in some passages it even resembles a commonplace book in the manner of *Yiwen*

¹⁰¹ This couplet complements an important letter from Cao Pi reflecting on the joys and splendors of that era after it has already ended: "Letter to Wu Zhi" 與吳質書, in *Wen xuan*, 42.1896–99.

¹⁰² Jason Webb argues convincingly for the essay's Heian afterlife in "The Big Business of Writing."

¹⁰³ The *Sui shu* "Jingji zhi" records a collection of Cao Pi's writings in 23 *juan* (*Sui shu*, 35.1059). It was lost and his reconstructed collection is much smaller; for instance, the *Wei Wendi ji* 魏文帝集 in the *Han Wei Liu chao bai san ming jia ji* 漢魏六朝百三名家集 comprises only two *juan*.

leiju, collecting various quotations and references on a shared topic. In spite of the vagaries of its argument, however, the overall message is clear. Okura reviews his disappointment with the various scriptures and healing methods that he has attempted to follow. The guidance of sages and healers has been fruitless, and yet Okura even suggests at several places in the essay that the fault with healing masters goes deeper than this instance, since they can only delay the end. The primary object of critique throughout the essay is thus the Daoist quest for immortality. In the second half of the essay, sections five through seven, Okura ruminates over how precious life is and how necessary it is to strive to pursue and extend longevity. He quotes the *Baopuzi* (a passage not in the extant text, though preserved in the *Taiping yulan*) saying that a dead man does not equal a live rat. In fact, in the *Taiping yulan* passage the live rat appears in the context of a larger analogy, contrasting a true Daoist master with an aspiring student. Okura's rendition focused on the vehicle of the comparison while ignoring the larger message, and so on the experience of life itself rather than the loftier goals of longevity or immortality. Section six develops this theme further with various reflections on transience, incidentally quoting two moving Chinese couplets on the *carpe diem* theme. All this builds up to the powerful conclusion, where Okura prays, despairingly, for life, and bemoans the comparison to the rat that he had himself introduced. This is a further critique of the Daoist perspective, which uses logical comparisons and other ideological schemes to minimize the importance of ordinary life. For Okura this life is the measure by which schemes and systems are judged.

Confucian Principle and Literary Art

At the same time, it is striking how Okura's skepticism towards doctrines embodied in various textual sources is itself conveyed through intertextual means, including quotation and pastiche of these same texts. In both "Condoling Myself for Dire Illness" and "Song of

Longing for My Children,” Okura both cites Buddhist and Daoist arguments even as he adapts them to his own purpose. Though Okura’s works construct a dichotomy of authentic experience versus misleading doctrine, the dichotomy cannot be maintained throughout his writings, just as pure experience cannot be described directly in a text. The tension between experience and its representation is displayed most vividly, though, in Okura’s poems that deal with what could loosely be termed Confucian topics, having to do with social responsibilities. Here there is no direct conflict between Confucian doctrine and Okura’s own experience of life, but nonetheless there is a certain distinction of emphasis, between Confucian principle and Okura’s focus on concrete details, which deepens our understanding of Okura’s worldview and, more importantly, style.

Okura has at least one work that is explicitly intended to convey a message of Confucian service, even if the ultimate effect is not entirely congruous.¹⁰⁴ This is the “Song for Dispelling Deluded Passions” 令反惑情歌.¹⁰⁵ The *kanbun* preface reads:

There was a certain person who knew to honor his father and mother, but neglected to accompany and care for them. He paid no heed to his wife and children, but treated them lightly as someone removing his slippers.¹⁰⁶ He called himself Master Ultramondane.¹⁰⁷ Though his will and spirit rose up above the cerulean clouds, his body remained fixed in the vulgar world. He had not attained the Way through his practice of self-cultivation, like a sage, but remained a person who gave up his status

¹⁰⁴ Another example might be his valedictory poem *MYS*, 6.978, though I would prefer to see in this a violent exposition of the ineluctable conflict between the emptiness (*kū* 空, Skt. *śūnyatā*) of Buddhist enlightenment, and the practical requirements of social duty and success (*ritsumei* 立名).

¹⁰⁵ *MYS*, 5.800–801.

¹⁰⁶ This entire clause, which is referenced again in the *chōka* itself, comes from *Han shu*, p. 25B.1228, where Emperor of the Han says that if we were able to follow the way of the Yellow Emperor, he too would desert his family without a second thought. Thus the allusion is specifically tied to the pursuit of Daoist transcendence.

¹⁰⁷ Literally “differing from the vulgar” 異俗, applying Keichū’s emendation of 畏 to 異, following *SNKBT*.

to take refuge amid the mountains and lakes. Therefore I demonstrated to him the Three Relations, and further explained and verified the Five Doctrines.¹⁰⁸ Then I presented him with this song, to dispel his deluded passions.

或有人、知敬父母忘於侍養、不顧妻子輕於脫履。自称畏俗先生、意氣雖揚青雲之上、身體猶在塵俗之中、未驗修行得道之聖、蓋是亡命山澤之民。所以指示三綱更開五教、遣之以歌令反其惑。

In the Chinese preface Okura describes a Daoist eccentric who rejects social norms. There was a lively Chinese tradition of compositions criticizing this kind of recluse, and attempting to persuade him to return to society. The name of Master Ultramondane might recall well-known figures who rejected social conventions, like the poet Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), author of “Biography of Master Great Man” 大人先生傳.¹⁰⁹ There was even a piece by Xu Gan 徐幹 (178–217) specifically directed at a “Master Surpassing the Vulgar” 逸俗先生, whose name is nearly identical with Okura’s character here. Thus Okura situates the poem quite distinctly in the discourses of reclusion and independence that began in the late Eastern Han, and reached a climax with the mid-3rd-century Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. Some scholars have speculated that this piece was composed for pragmatic reasons in the context of Okura’s official duties, but the high proportion of literary conventions from early medieval China suggests that it is more likely intended as a more wide-ranging study.¹¹⁰ Okura then offers to expound Confucian doctrines, although the *chōka* does not really follow

¹⁰⁸ Both refer to Confucian teachings. The Three Relations are those between prince and vassal, between father and son, and between husband and wife. The Five Doctrines are the intrafamilial virtues appropriate to father, mother, older brother, younger brother, and son; see *Zuozhuan*, Duke Wen, year 18 (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 638). In case we had any doubt as their referents, Okura himself explains both terms in notes to the *kanbun* preface to the Chinese poem before *MYS*, 5.897: “Lamenting and Grieving that the Way of this World is for Things to Cohere Temporarily and Soon Disperse, So Easily Lost and Hard to Keep: One Poem with Preface” 悲嘆俗道假合即離易去難留詩一首並序.

¹⁰⁹ *Ruan ji ji jiaozhu*, A.161–92.

¹¹⁰ Takagi speculated that Master Ultramondane was based on Okura’s friend Tabito (“Futatsu no sei”), which is certainly plausible, but only in the sense of identifying the model for a figure in a painting, which does not exhaust the significance of that figure *qua* painting.

through on this offer. As is his wont, Okura places distinct visions of life in tension without preferring any one model absolutely (*MYS*, 5.800):

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>titipapa wo</i> | Looking upon mother |
| <i>mireba taputwo-si</i> | and father we honor them; |
| <i>myekwo mireba</i> | looking upon wife |
| <i>megusi-utukusi</i> | and child we adore them fondly. |
| <i>yo no naka pa</i> | In this world of ours |
| <i>kaku zo kotowari</i> | such is the order of things. |
| <i>motidori no</i> | Like birds to the lime |
| <i>kakarapasi mo yo</i> | how we cling and clutch to them, ¹¹¹ |
| <i>yukupye sira-neba</i> | because we do not know the future. |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>ukegutu wo</i> | As if discarding |
| <i>nuki-turu goto-ku</i> | a pair of worn-out slippers, |
| <i>pumi-nukite</i> | roaming apart now, |
| <i>yuku tipu pito pa</i> | a man journeying away: |
| <i>ipakwi ywori</i> | are you the sort of man |
| <i>nari-de-si pito ka</i> | born from the rocks and trees? ¹¹² |
| <i>na ga na nora-sane</i> | Then tell me your name now! |

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>ame pye yukaba</i> | If you live in the sky |
| <i>na ga manima ni</i> | you may do as you please; |
| <i>tuti naraba</i> | but on this earth |
| <i>opo-kimi imasu</i> | the sovereign reigns |
| <i>ko no terasu</i> | everywhere beneath |
| <i>pitukwi no sita pa</i> | the light of sun and moon; |
| <i>amakumo no</i> | as far as you can see |
| <i>muka-busu kipami</i> | the clouds in heaven, |

¹¹¹ Vovin has a helpful explanation for the difficult *hapax legomenon*, *kakarapasi* 可可良波志, identifying it as “a deverbal adjective derived from the iterative form *kakar-ap-* of the verb *kakar-* ‘to be attached.’” See Vovin, *Man’yōshū: Book 5, A New English Translation*, 29.

¹¹² This line may be referring to *Baopuzi* again (see *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*), 3.53. Note that that passage is criticizing those Daoist practitioners who abandon their own family relations for selfish pursuits. However, this is a common idiom describing the unfeeling person, also found even in Zhang Zhuo, *Youxianku jiaozhu*, p. 35.

taniguku no as far as the toad
sa-wataru kipami of the valley can crawl to,¹¹³
kikosi-wosu such is the splendor
kuni no mapora zo of the country where he reigns.¹¹⁴
ka ni kaku ni Doing this and that
posi-ki manima ni just as you please, just as you like:
sika ni pa arazi ka do you still believe that can pass?

父母乎 美礼婆多布斗斯 妻子美礼婆 米具斯宇都久志 余能奈迦波 加久叙許等
 和理 母智騰利乃 可々良波志母与 由久弊斯良祢婆 宇既具都遠 奴伎都流其等
 久 布美奴伎提 由久智布比等波 伊波紀欲利 奈利提志比等迦 奈何名能良佐祢
 阿米弊由迦婆 奈何麻爾麻爾 都智奈良婆 大王伊摩周 許能提羅周 日月能斯多
 波 阿麻久毛能 牟迦夫周伎波美 多爾具久能 佐和多流伎波美 企許斯遠周 久
 爾能麻保良叙 可爾迦久爾 保志伎麻爾麻爾 斯可爾波阿羅慈迦

The *chōka* has a remarkable tripartite structure, the breaks marked by 7-7 couplets. The first section undermines the same Confucian doctrines mentioned in the preface through the powerful analogy of the birdlime for human attachments, which Imura has shown to be rooted in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* and other Buddhist texts.¹¹⁵ The second section borrows the same slipper analogy from the preface, and a passage from the *Baopuzi* criticizing the indifference of certain recluses to their own family ties. Finally the third section describes the splendor of the realm as a kind of enticement to encourage the interlocutor to return and pursue his own affairs within society.

The conclusion of the *chōka* employs formulaic phrases celebrating the contours of the Yamato realm. It would be impossible to compare Okura's sense of native *kami* with his understanding of the continental religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism, since his

¹¹³ This is a formulaic expression also found in the Norito texts “Toshigoi no matsuri” 祈年祭 and “Minazuki no tsukinami” 六月月次. See Philippi, *Norito*, 19, 38.

¹¹⁴ Cf. *yamato pa / kuni no maporoba* in *Kojiki kayō*, #30 (OCJ). Saigō (*Kojiki chūshaku*, 3:354–55) analyzes the word *maporoba* into a root *pōra* 洞, signifying a vast expanse, with preface *ma-* and suffix *-ba*.

¹¹⁵ Imura, *Man'yōshū zenchū: maki dai go*, 46.

kanbun essays do not engage in detail with the *kami* of Japan.¹¹⁶ Perhaps Okura would have viewed the religion of Yamato as an incontrovertible fact of the natural world, unlike the continental teachings that required more cautious examination. In any case, this passage adds another layer of meaning to the poem, affirming the spiritual riches of the world immediately around us in opposition to a fantasy of heavenly ascension. The envoy poem makes this point explicit, though, returning to the human realm (*MYS*, 5.801):

| | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>pisakata no</i> | Awesome and boundless |
| <i>amadi pa topo-si</i> | Heaven's path is far away; |
| <i>naponapo-ni</i> | so you must be serious, |
| <i>ipye ni kapyerite</i> | return to your own home |
| <i>nari wo si-masa-ni</i> | and tend to your affairs there. |

比佐迦多能 阿麻遲波等保斯 奈保奈保爾 伊弊爾可弊利提 奈利乎斯麻佐爾

This entire set of Chinese preface, tripartite *chōka*, and *tanka* envoy contains distinctive allusions to Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian texts, as well as a celebratory formula resembling the *norito* prayers. By following the import of these various allusions we can approach the meaning of the text as a whole. Okura on one hand is apparently affirming a Confucian view that human beings ought to take their social relations as primary. Master Ultramondane ought to return to his family and concern himself with his place in society. At the same time, though, Okura's affirmation seems half-hearted, if not ironical. We must behave this way because it is the way of the world and because we are on earth, not in Heaven; so his rejection of Daoist pursuits is purely pragmatic. The poem itself does not enunciate the Confucian arguments for the rewards to be garnered from cultivating one's virtue. Instead it places the human subject within its proper limits, on the face of this earth, in

¹¹⁶ An omission not unrelated to the basic fact that “before modern times Shinto did not exist as an independent religion.” See Kuroda, “Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion,” 3. Elaborating on this point, see also the essays in Breen and Teeuwen, eds., *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*.

relation to family and society. The human condition is so, not because of our innate capability towards virtue, but rather for the more fundamental fact that we cannot ascend into any heaven beyond this world. In his insistence on returning from doctrine to lived experience, Okura reaffirms the inevitability of suffering within this life as represented by the birdlime, itself a Buddhist insight. The emphasis is on the nature of lived experience as understood in part by selective appropriation of Buddhist and Daoist doctrine, further motivated by the sacredness of the natural landscape.

Okura inquires further into the fundamental limitations of human existence in his famous “Dialogue on Poverty.”¹¹⁷ Since the annotation after the poem does not mention Okura’s office of governor, it is generally believed that he would have composed this sometime after leaving office in 730. Scholars have identified various inspirations for the poem in the Chinese corpus.¹¹⁸ But to the extent that these allusions exist and have been properly identified, they only demonstrate how self-consciously Okura has departed from the Confucian discourse on poverty and might even be criticizing it. The principal tradition of poetic writing on the topic of poverty in China found a nobility in poverty; poverty was the outward sign of the true virtue of a gentleman, who would not compromise his ideals for material satisfaction, as in Tao Yuanming’s poetry.¹¹⁹ Particularly relevant here is the “Rhapsody on Expelling Poverty” 逐貧賦 by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE – 18 CE), which depicts poverty as a kind of moral instructor, who teaches Yang Xiong how to resist temptation and become indifferent to physical ailments.¹²⁰ This piece bears a considerable resemblance to Okura’s dialogue, since it is also a dialogue, consisting of a speech by Yang

¹¹⁷ *MYS*, 5.892–93. Cf. translation in Cranston, *A Waka Anthology*, 1:361–63.

¹¹⁸ See, e.g., Tatsumi, *Man’yōshū to Chūgoku bungaku*, 415–20.

¹¹⁹ *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, p. 4.371.

¹²⁰ See Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody*, 104–7. This piece is somewhat suspect and may have been composed not by Yang Xiong but by some later writer.

and then a reply by Poverty.¹²¹ But the message of Okura's work is diametrically opposed to this, since Okura sets out to show that there is nothing elegant or inspiring about poverty. His "poverty" is not an abstraction at all but an extremely tangible, visceral experience.¹²²

Explicating the meaning of this difficult but unforgettable work first requires analysis of the title and narrative frame. Though various interpretations have proliferated, including the ingenious "Dialogue between the Poor Man and Destitute Man," which does reflect the structure of the work accurately, overall the most convincing is simply "Dialogue on Poverty," while admitting the extensive ramifications of both "dialogue" and "poverty" in this context.¹²³ The poem is naturally divided into two halves, the first of which presents the perspective of the narrator, an alter ego of Okura:

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>kaze mazipe</i> | The gales beat down |
| <i>ame puru ywo no</i> | with falling rain this night, |
| <i>ame mazipe</i> | the rain beats down |
| <i>yuki puru ywo pa</i> | with falling snow this night: |

¹²¹ One also has to keep in mind, of course, the fact that the circumstances of poverty were probably quite consistent in premodern East Asia even without direct allusion. Kojima offers a wonderful demonstration of this point: a Chinese poem whose description of poverty bears a substantial resemblance to Okura's "Dialogue"—but was in fact authored by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) a century *after* Okura. See Kojima, *Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 22.

¹²² This is not quite the end of the discussion. The *Yiwen leiju* contains two *fu* on poverty: that by Yang Xiong, and Shu Xi's 束皙 (263–302?) "Rhapsody on a Poor Family" 貧家賦 (*Yiwen leiju*, pp. 35.628–30). The latter pieces, like Shu Xi's other surviving compositions, shows a special penchant for depicting the humble details of everyday life (see Knechtges, "Early Chinese Rhapsodies on Poverty and Pasta"). Kojima argues (*Jōdai Nihon bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku*, 975–76), that the *Yiwen leiju* itself was Okura's source, since there are parallels with both of these *fu* and various *shi* poems as well. Overall, though, Okura seems to be responding most intently to Yang Xiong's rhapsody, whose dialogic structure it shares.

¹²³ Among other evidence, the compound *pinqiong* 貧窮 occurs very frequently in the Chinese versions of the Buddhist sutras, and particularly often in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, which Okura knew well. I follow Imura, *Man'yōshū zenchū: maki dai go*, 189–90. For a more extended analysis of the layers of artifice in the poem see also Imura, *Okura to Mushimaro*, 121–33.

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>subye mo na-ku</i> | it is so cold |
| <i>samu-ku si areba</i> | I am utterly helpless, |
| <i>katasipo wo</i> | nibbling here |
| <i>twori-tudusiropi</i> | upon nuggets of rock salt, |
| <i>kasuyuzake</i> | tippling the lees |
| <i>uti-susuropite</i> | left over from the saké, |
| <i>sipabukapi</i> | coughing while |
| <i>pana bisibisi-ni</i> | my nose snorts and snuffles, |
| <i>sika to ara-nu</i> | brushing the stubble |
| <i>pige kaki-nadete</i> | of my beard, such as it is . . . |

風雜 雨布流欲乃 雨雜 雪布流欲波 為部母奈久 寒之安礼婆 堅塩乎
 取都豆之呂比 糟湯酒 宇知須須呂比弓 之叵夫可比 鼻毗之毗之爾
 志可登阿良農 比宜可伎撫而

The first four lines of the poem form a paradoxical combination of chiasmus, isocolon, and repetition. On one hand there is the basic structure of chiasmus: wind and rain, rain and snow; but this interweaves with the “beat down with . . . this night” element which is repeated exactly, so that gales-rain-rain-snow form a chiasmus within a larger pattern of isocolon. Though modern scholars have tended to ascribe much of the rhetorical patterning of Nara literature to influence from Six Dynasties court poetry, Roy Andrew Miller noted another important source for it also, the elaborate schemes of repetition, enumeration, and chiasmus to be found in the Buddhist sutras.¹²⁴ This point in turn may draw our attention to the way that the entire composition seems designed as a reflection on the human capacity for suffering.

The artistry of the opening lines depicting the cold winter night as landscape is one of numerous reasons to understand the first speaker as Okura himself, or an Okura-like

¹²⁴ Miller, “A Korean Poet in Eighth-Century Japan,” 714. The *Vimalakīrti sūtra* has an alternate title, preserved only in Tibetan, which means roughly “adroit in the rhetorical-linguistic techniques of paronomasia and chiasma.” Though the connection to Okura is new, Miller is here re-translating Lamotte *L'enseignement de Vimalakīrti*, 33–34.

representation. When one further notes that, much as he complains, the speaker has multiple layers of clothing, and even sake to drink, even if it is the humble drink brewed from the lees, one sees that this figure is not so poor as to be an unrealistic representation of Okura at some time in his life (there is no reason to assume that even an autobiographical poem must be *contemporaneously* autobiographical). After leaving his post in Chikuzen, Okura might well have felt himself poor relative to his former station, after giving up the perks of office. In fact, we have concrete historical evidence of former officials reduced to poverty in this period.¹²⁵ Thus this poem, whether or not autobiographical, may be presenting yet another dimension of the same Okura persona familiar from his other works, the earnest scholar-official devoted to his children.¹²⁶ Indeed, the longer second half of the poem presents the truly destitute man and his family (*MYS*, 5.892 continued):

.....
poke puki-tate-zu no cooking fire rises overhead
kosiki ni pa and in the steamer
kumo no su kakite spiders spin their webs;
ipi kasiku we have forgotten
koto mo wasurete even how to cook rice.
nuyedori no While we burble on
nodoyopi woru ni faintly as the golden thrush,
itonokite suddenly “the end is cut
sema-ki mono wo off of something already
pasi kiru to exceedingly short”--

¹²⁵ There is a case mentioned in the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本書紀 for the year 722 of the former provincial governor of Suō 周防 (in the eastern part of modern Yamaguchi prefecture), who was investigated for stealing government property, and turned out to be living in extreme poverty (see *Shoku Nihongi*, 9.112–14). This was pointed out in Katō, “Bingū mondōka ni taisuru gimon,” cited in Imura, *Man'yōshū zenchū: maki dai go*, 195.

¹²⁶ The account in the *Shoku Nihongi* specifically mentions that the thieving official was discovered to have “no cloth at all in his house” 家無尺布, so he was even more destitute than the characters in Okura’s poem. See *Shoku Nihongi*, 9.114.

ip-eru ga goto-ku as goes the saying,¹²⁷
simoto toru for the bark of the
satwowosa ga kowe pa village head, whip in hand,
neyadwo made comes right to my bedroom,
ki tati-ywobapi-nu calling me to get up and come.
kaku bakari Am I become no more
subye na-ki monoka than this entirely helpless thing?
yo no naka no miti But such is the way of the world.¹²⁸

火氣布伎多弓受 許之伎爾波 久毛能須可伎弓 飯炊 事毛和須礼提 奴延鳥乃 能
 杼与比居爾 伊等乃伎提 短物乎 端伎流等 云之如 楚取 五十戸良我許惠波 寢屋
 度麻弓 来立呼比奴 可久婆可里 須部奈伎物能可 世間乃道

As the destitute man complains about the village headman who comes to collect taxes, Okura reiterates several times this point that suffering can always be exacerbated. This message of political critique, quite rare in Japanese *waka*, has naturally been a focus of discussion on the piece. But the emphasis of Okura's composition does not lie here so much as on the texture of the description throughout the poem, and its implicit evocation of an attitude towards life itself.

Okura describes the conditions of poverty with hallucinatory realism. One of the most distinctive features of this work, though also present throughout Okura's *chōka*, is the use of what Takagi Ichinosuke has called *kogo* 孤語, the expressions that occur only once within the *Man'yōshū*.¹²⁹ These words mostly do occur within other texts in the early Japanese corpus, and so are not true *hapax legomena*, but they still are not seen within the conventional poetic usage of the day. They belong to a colloquial or vulgar register quite out of place in most *waka* poetry. Takagi calculates that 25% of the individual words used in the "Dialogue

¹²⁷ The pessimist's take on Matthew 13:12: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (cf. Mark 4:25).

¹²⁸ The powerful conclusions stands out dramatically in its orthography as 世間乃道, three of the four characters being used as logograms.

¹²⁹ Pointed out in Takagi, "Bingū mondō no ron," 378–87.

on Poverty” belong to this category, a remarkable proportion that demonstrates the singularity of Okura’s diction. These rare words include material objects like the “rock salt” and “sake lees,” the “straw” and the “whip,” but also the memorable verbs like “nibbling” (*tudusiropi*) and “tippling” (*susuropite*), as the smoke “rises overhead” (*puki-tate*) and the thrushes “burble on” (*nodoyopi*). This use of picturesque details is one of Okura’s most characteristic literary techniques. In contrast to the systems of thought and the patchwork of allusions that form one layer of his work, these specific and unusual details offer a memorable counterpoint.

Were one simply to summarize the content of the “Dialogue on Poverty,” mentioning its allusions to Chinese texts, it would sound like a piece of obviously Confucian import, an indirect critique of an unjust state. Though this is surely one meaningful layer, however, it is surely not the primary one. The most visible, memorable, and evocative layer of the text is its depiction of the actual texture of poverty, the distinctiveness of its two main characters and the specific objects they possess or lack. The envoy to the “Dialogue on Poverty” sums up its message with an image similar to that of the “Song for Dispelling Deluded Passions” (*MYS*, 5.893):

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>yononaka wo</i> | This world of ours: |
| <i>u-si to yasa-si to</i> | however hateful, however shameful |
| <i>omopedomo</i> | it seems at times, |
| <i>tobi-tati-kane-tu</i> | yet we cannot soar up into the sky |
| <i>tori ni si ara-neba</i> | because we men are not birds. |

世間乎 宇之等夜佐之等 於母倍杼母 飛立可祢都 鳥爾之安良祢婆

Once again Okura tells us that a human being cannot escape or transcend earthly existence. Just as he reaffirmed the centrality of emotion in the face of Buddhist liberation, and the inevitability of death in the face of Daoist transcendence, Okura loves to remind us that “men are not birds,” and have no choice but to deal with their immediate circumstances. Though he

does suggest that the Three Principles and Five Doctrines of Confucianism are valuable guidelines, it is no concern of his to elaborate on them in his poetry. What is real and precious more than anything is our actual experience here between Heaven and Earth. Even while describing poverty and dejection, and even while facing the most dire illness himself, Okura finds enjoyment in the details of human experience. Thus the critique of particular doctrines is only one constituent element of Okura's work, but not at all its principal intention. Okura's greater achievement lies in the use of the singular, indigestible, irrefutable details of human life—even if this literary evocation of experience also draws on the inspiration of his eclectic reading of Chinese texts.

Okura's Legacy

It has been said that Okura's influence on later Japanese literature was the least of any of the major *Man'yōshū* poets.¹³⁰ Though he was rarely mentioned explicitly by later writers, though, he initiated a major vein of literary expression and his indirect influence was considerable. The most celebrated *kanshi* poet of the Heian era, Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903), continued to write poems on private topics like his love for his children or consideration for the plight of poor peasants.¹³¹ Though Michizane, needless to say, was most directly inspired by the example of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and other Chinese

¹³⁰ This has probably been said many times, but one example is in the *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* edition, preface, p. 20. Roy Andrew Miller does offer a parallel between Okura's account of his ailment and the enumeration of medications in Tanizaki's fiction (Miller, "A Korean Poet in Eighth-Century Japan," 719).

¹³¹ See Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court*, or the telling example in idem, "Sugawara no Michizane, a Heian Literatus and Statesman," 109.

poets, Okura was a closer model for writing about poverty and children on Japanese soil.¹³² Okura is thus an early representative of a long-enduring strain in Japan's *kanshi* traditions.

The article has aimed to demonstrate, however, that Okura is even more interesting for his achievement as a critical reader of Chinese-language sources. Recent work by numerous scholars writing in English has offered valuable new approaches to the “Sino-Japanese polarity,”¹³³ with Wiebke Denecke and others rightly emphasizing the independence of the *kanshibun* tradition.¹³⁴ As with any question touching on Chinese influence on Japanese works of literature, tracing the Chinese sources of Okura's writings is only an initial stage of interpretation. It is often necessary to identify the sutras, commonplace books, and *Wenxuan* poems that served as key sources simply to understand the implications of Okura's sentences, for which we are otherwise sorely lacking in context. But the result confounds any simple model of “influence” or “inspiration”; to the contrary, Okura often explicitly protests against the doctrinal content of works to which he alludes. In his original, if sometimes tendentious, readings of Chinese texts, he offered an important model for the future of Japanese literature.

In particular, by resisting dogmatic doctrine with the verve only possible for someone with a considerable mastery of the textual sources, Okura epitomizes the ability of early Japanese writers to employ distinctive concrete imagery, even while borrowing rhetorical models from China. Timothy Wixted has pointed out, for instance, that even though the prefaces to the *Kokinshū* are heavily influenced by Chinese sources, “the concrete vocabulary

¹³² There is also a tone somewhat reminiscent of Okura in the “self-aware pathos, teetering between ridicule and aggrandizement” of later Heian compositions like the “Song of the Tailless Ox” by Minamoto Shitagō 源順 (911–983). See Steininger, “Poetic Ministers,” 179.

¹³³ Steininger has a helpful survey of previous scholarship in “Poetic Ministers,” 5–10, though it may be unfair to describe the study of influence as a “critical cul-de-sac” (p. 9).

¹³⁴ See Denecke, “Chinese Antiquity and Court Spectacle in Early ‘Kanshi.’”

used to characterize Japanese verse is decidedly non-Chinese in cast.”¹³⁵ With Okura also, the concrete imagery is often highly distinctive and difficult to trace in the Chinese sources that he otherwise quotes so widely.

With these dimensions of Okura’s poetry in mind, a faint recollection of Okura’s work in the *Tale of Genji* is extremely suggestive for an appreciation of his legacy. This is the depiction of the poverty of Suetsumuhana’s establishment in the sixth, which seems to owe something to the spirit of Okura’s “Dialogue on Poverty.”¹³⁶ That this is not a baseless comparison is shown by a specific allusion to the envoy of the “Dialogue”: the ladies-in-waiting, who are freezing in their shabby quarters, “shiver so hard they might soar up off the ground” 飛び立ちぬべくふるふもあり。¹³⁷ The probability that Murasaki Shikibu might have had Okura’s poem loosely in mind while composing one chapter is a tantalizing link, if difficult to prove. But there is a more fundamental affinity that indicates the scope of Okura’s achievement. In the same chapter, Suetsumuhana’s long, red-tipped nose is one of those unforgettable details of the novel that function similarly to Okura’s significant details of perception, like his attention to the act of eating the muskmelon. It is Okura’s concrete image of the incalculable joy of being alive.

¹³⁵ Wixted, “Chinese Influences on the Kokinshū Prefaces,” 400.

¹³⁶ See Ogawa, *Man’yōshū to Nihonjin*, 77–79.

¹³⁷ To “fly up” is the same verb as *tobi-tati-kane-tu* above. See *Genji monogatari*, 1:223. See also Suzuki, “*Genji monogatari to Man’yōshū*,” 111.

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