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Institutional Libraries in Japan's Classic Court Age (Heian Period, 794–1185)

Abstract: This paper treats three types of institutional libraries in classical Japan: royal libraries, libraries of private court academies, and monastic libraries. Two issues are explored: (1) whether we can speak of 'institutional' libraries or whether all libraries were in essence private libraries; and (2) which works were collected in libraries and which works do not surface in library records.

The classic court age of Japan, the so-called Heian period (794–1185), was a period that knew, and then discarded, book printing techniques. It was, as it were, a manuscript age by choice. It was also an age that is primarily remembered as one that produced the first iconic works of Japanese literature, such as *The tale of Genji* and *The pillow-book of Sei Shōnagon*. A closer examination of libraries in this age will force us to rethink these perceptions; neither were printed books really absent, nor did narrative fiction in the vernacular (as opposed to Sinitic texts) feature in known book collections. Two library catalogues for the Heian court are extant today and they illustrate this point very clearly. Also, they more or less bookend this era, as one dates from 891 and the other was compiled around 1160. At the same time, they represent the two categories of libraries, the private, and the institutional, that are at the core of this paper and that may largely overlap.

This paper will explore two issues: (1) whether we can speak of 'institutional' libraries or whether all libraries, including royal libraries, were in essence private libraries; and (2) which works were collected in libraries and which remained invisible in the records that we have. Emphasis will be on libraries in court circles, but I will also touch upon monastic institutions.

Perhaps some clarification is needed with regards to the word 'institutional'. In the context of this paper, I use the term somewhat loosely, to indicate book collections belonging to, or associated with, organisations catering to larger groups of users and created with the expectation to outlive their founders. There are three categories of institutional libraries to consider for the Heian period: [a] royal libraries; [b] libraries of private court academies; and [c] monastic libraries.¹ Finally, I make a, admittedly largely artificial, distinction between libraries

¹ There is not that much written about libraries and book collection in the Heian period. In Eng-

and archives. My focus is on collections of books belonging to a shared canon, not on records or archives specific to one particular organisation. The distinction is helpful in that we have ample evidence that archives were actively used, but the use made of institutional book collections remains a bit of an enigma.

1 Royal libraries

When in 757 the so-called Yōrō code was promulgated in order to regulate much of Japan's state bureaucracy, one of the many offices that it outlined was the Bureau of Books and Drawings (*zushoryō* var. *fumi no tsukasa* 図書寮), part of the Ministry of Central Affairs (*nakatsukasashō* 中務省).² Its main role was to act as the state's library and to preserve books: these were conceptualised in two categories that became dominant right away, namely Buddhist scriptures or 'inner writings' (*naiten* 内典) and non-Buddhist texts or 'outer writings' (*geten* 外典, var. *gesho* 外書; a category that is often somewhat misleadingly labelled 'Confucian'). Interestingly, the Bureau also stored Buddhist statues. Its book collection served a purpose beyond mere storage: the Bureau was the designated office for the compilation of histories of Japan. However, more or less coinciding with the last national history, compiled in 901, the Bureau's role as library became an empty shell in the Heian period and its function of storing and maintaining the court's book collections shifted to a new office, known as the 'royal library' (*goshodokoro* 御書所).

The concept of a royal palace library as initially somehow distinct from the state's Bureau but gradually conflating the distinction between the emperor's and the state's book collections is probably best understood as symbolic of how the abstract idea of state and the more concrete sense of 'the royal' were intertwined. The umbrella notion of a royal library in practice was split up in three different palace libraries, each with their own functionaries.³ These were the 'royal library' proper, the 'inner royal library' (*uchi no goshodokoro* 内御書所), and the

lish, there is a concise overview in Peter Kornicki's landmark study *The Book in Japan*; Kornicki 1998, 364–370. In Japanese, as Kornicki rightly points out, there still is nothing that surpasses the comprehensive inventory of libraries by Ono Noriaki; Ono 1944, 23–416 (this includes the eighth century). Two of the private libraries mentioned in this paper receive scrutiny in Smits 2009.

2 For the *zushoryō*, see Ono 1944, 42–65; Kornicki 1998, 365. The Yōrō code, already drafted in 718, was a revision of the Taihō code of 702, which in turn was based on a Chinese code from 651.

3 For the *goshodokoro*, see Ono 1944, 93–97; Nagata 1988. Oddly, Ono Noriaki pays little attention to the *goshodokoro*; instead his focus is essentially on the *zushoryō*.

'one-copy library' (*ippon goshodokoro* 一本御書所). The inner royal library seems to have retained more explicitly the notion of being the private library of the emperor. The 'one-copy library' was exactly that: a palace library for rare books, of which only one copy was known to exist in the country.

Frustratingly, it is not very clear how these royal libraries were used. Were they primarily repositories of texts whose primary function was to simply exist in the royal collections? Who had access to these collections and for what purposes? The fact that shadow collections existed, in the form of collections owned by for example the court academy (*daigakuryō* 大学寮) and its satellite institutes, suggests that royal libraries were not necessarily 'public' and that they were not the first port of call for scholars. However, like the Bureau of Books and Drawings, the royal libraries did seem to have a connection to the production of new state sponsored texts. For example, the main compiler of the first royal anthology of Japanese language verse, *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集 (Collection of Poems Old and New, 914), was Ki no Tsurayuki 紀貫之 (d. 945). The preface to this poetry collection explicitly mentions his function as 'keeper of royal books' (*gosho no tokoro no azukari* 御書所預).⁴

2 Private academies and their libraries

The eight and early ninth centuries show some examples of privately founded institutions that one might call public schools. An early one, albeit pre-Heian period, is the Untei-in 芸亭院 (Camphor Pavilion Hall) established in c. 771 by Isonokami no Yakatsugu 石上宅嗣 (729–781), in the eighth-century capital Heijō-kyō (present-day Nara), and which was still in existence there in 797. Ostensibly, the Untei-in aimed to foster both Buddhist and 'Confucian' (or rather: Sinitic) studies, that is to study both 'inner' and 'outer writings'. The governing idea was that the study of Chinese classic texts facilitated an informed reading of Buddhist texts. According to Yakatsugu's biography in *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 (Annals of Japan, Continued, 797), he converted his home to a temple, and there he organized a

⁴ *Kokin wakashū*, *Kana no jo*, 29; Nagata 1988, 363. Yet unlike the state histories for which scholarly editors extracted their information from archival records in the royal libraries, it is not at all clear that Tsurayuki and his colleagues found their material in the same libraries. This may have to do with the question of which categories of texts were collected in the royal libraries, see below.

school that seems to have functioned as a privately operated public library of sorts, with some five hundred scrolls in its collection.⁵

One such school that did operate in the Heian period, is the Shugeishuchi-in 綜芸種智院 (Hall of Various Worldviews in an Enlightened Mind), which was in function in the years 828–845 and which was founded by the monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835) two and a half decades after his sojourn in Tang China. This school, too, trained in both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ texts. Presumably, but this is hard to verify, Kūkai’s school also provided its students access to texts.⁶

What the Untei-in example shows, is that early on there existed in Japan a notion that libraries could exist outside the infrastructure of court institutions, even if such schools, at least some of which came with libraries of sorts, did not outlive their founders for long. Also, these institutions aimed at great accessibility. Yakatsugu’s library was reputedly Japan’s ‘first public library’.⁷ Of Kūkai’s school it is usually emphasised that it catered explicitly to ‘the general masses’ (*ippan minshū* 一般民衆). Nevertheless, chances of survival for libraries were greater if they did somehow connect to institutions of the court, of which the court academy is one example.

The private and semi-private schools of the world of the Heian court that outlasted their founders were all tied to the court academy. The earliest examples of private tutorial schools that helped students at the academy prepare their curriculum date from the seventh century,⁸ but the ninth century, that is the early Heian period, saw quite a rise in them. Not surprisingly, such private academies (*shijuku* 私塾) were founded by scholar families with vested interests in Sinitic learning. Several presented themselves in part as cram schools for students at, or hoping to get into, the court academy. Hence, some are referred to as ‘academy boarding

5 See Yakatsugu’s biography and the regulations (*jōshiki* 条式) for the Untei-in in *Shoku Nihongi*, book 36 (sixth month of Ten’ō 1 [781]), vol. 16, 200–201. See also Hisaki 1968, 169–171; Kornicki 1998, 368. ‘Un’ in Yakatsugu’s library’s name is a term for fragrant herbs that help to keep insects out of books. Another eighth-century private school is the Nikyō-in 二教院 (Two Teachings Hall), established by the scholar of Chinese literature Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備 (695–775) in 769. This school, too, explicitly fostered the study of Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist Sinitic texts. Makibi had spent time in China, and seems to have catered especially to students wishing to study Chinese classics.

6 For Kūkai’s regulations for his school, see his *Shugeishuchi-in shiki* 綜芸種智院式, *Shōryōshū* 10, no. 102, 420–423 (esp. 422, 423). See also Ono 1944, 135–138; Hisaki 1968, 173. Kūkai’s text explicitly mentions Untei-in and Nikyō-in as two bad examples of schools that eventually folded.

7 *Shoku Nihongi*, vol. 16, 200, 201, 562 (note 51); Hisaki 1968, 169–171; Kornicki 1998, 368.

8 Minabuchi no Shōan 南淵請安 (dates unknown) was a scholar-monk who went to study in Sui China in 608. After his return to the Japanese court in 632, he established a private academy where he taught young nobles.

schools' (*daigaku bessō* 大学別曹), following official recognition of their status by the court academy. Several private academies became highly regarded educational institutions in their own right and would also train men (never women) who failed to get into the court academy but might hope for appointment in lower ranking positions in the court bureaucracy.⁹

In addition, there was a number of private schools not formally recognised as a court academy annex but certainly valued by court scholars. The best known of these was undoubtedly the private academy operated by the Sugawara family, called San'intei 山陰亭 (Mountain Shade Pavilion).¹⁰ The scholar, statesman, and poet Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903) described its setup in his *Note on My Library, or Record of My Study* (*Shosai no ki* 書齋記) in 893:

In Sempū Ward in the eastern sector of the capital there is a house, in the southwest corner of the house is a corridor, and at the very south end of the corridor is a room. The room is hardly more than ten feet square, so that those entering or leaving have to squeeze past each other, and those occupying the room have to sit with mats pushed together side by side. And yet out of this room in the past have come close to a hundred men who passed the *shūsai* and *shinshi* examinations. [...] I shifted the blinds and mats around and straightened up the room, and brought my books and stacked them away there.¹¹

We must assume that all private academies stored books to which their instructors and students had access. In some case we know as much, since their existence is recorded.

3 Private libraries

A related issue is the existence of private libraries. We know of several of these. In some instances, specifically in the case of scholars, the distinction between a private library and that of a private institution is hard to draw and arguably meaningless. The

⁹ For an overview of the academy boarding schools and private academies, see Momo 1947, 170–243, 449–471; Hisaki 1968, 175–180.

¹⁰ Its more informal name was Kanke Rōka 菅家廊下 (Sugawara's Corridor). Momo Hiroyuki has pointed out that the name Kōbaiden 紅梅殿 (Red Plum Hall), the name by which the school is often referred to, was strictly speaking the name of the entire living compound of the Sugawara family, not of the school that occupied only part of it. Momo 1947, 460; Hisaki 1968, 176–177.

¹¹ *Kanke bunsō* no. 526, 535; trans. Watson 1975, 104, 105. The *shūsai* and *shinshi* examinations qualified a candidate for civil service. Momo Hiroyuki suggests that Michizane may be describing only the headmaster's study, and that the Sugawara school and library were bigger. Momo 1947, 465.

San'intei of the Sugawara family mentioned above is one such example, which was open to students and scholars associating with the Sugawara, as is probably also true for the library of the bureaucrat and scholar-poet Ōe no Masafusa 大江匡房 (1041–1111) and his Library of the Ōe Family (Gōke Bunko 江家文庫), which at the time of its destruction by fire in 1153 contained tens of thousands of volumes.¹² In fact, if we can believe legend, Masafusa himself saw his massive library in a holistic relationship with the state, and its loss was certainly widely bemoaned at the time.¹³

The situation is clear for the libraries of wealthy power-brokers. These were undeniably private libraries. The statesman Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1027), for instance, was an avid book collector with an impressive library of over two thousand volumes.¹⁴ He was keen to collect printed editions of the works of the famous Chinese poet Bai Juyi and of the equally canonical *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wenxuan* 文選), which he obtained either through Chinese merchants or through Japanese monks abroad.¹⁵ The same is true for Michinaga's descendent Fujiwara no Yōrinaga 藤原頼長 (1120–1156), who in 1145 finished the building of his Uji library (*fumigura* var. *fugura* 文庫, or *fudono* 文殿), located in the northeast of the capital. Until then he had stored his books in special wheeled chests (*fumiguruma* var. *fuguruma* 文車), which could easily be moved in the event that the house caught fire. It had taken him less than three months to build the storehouse for his books. It is one of the few libraries for which we have a description of its physical properties. The structure measured nearly seventy-eight square meters and was fenced off by a very thick earthen wall. The books were stored in numbered boxes which were shelved on book racks, five shelves on the east of the storehouse and six on the west side. The books were divided into four categories: study material such as the Confucian classics; Chinese historical works; miscellaneous Chinese texts; and, finally, Japanese books.¹⁶ The latter will have consisted of books in Sinitic,

¹² Ono 1944, 331–335; Kornicki 1998, 369. Of course, the 'ten thousand' and 'tens of thousands' mentioned in historical sources is an extraordinary number and may simply mean 'a lot'. For the existence of private libraries in Heian Japan, see Kornicki 1998, 369–370.

¹³ *Zoku kojidan* 2.41, 659. See there also for quotations from several journal entries from 1153 and the quasi-official history *Hyakurenshō*. Masafusa supposedly said that 'as long as the country of Japan remains, these books will be preserved'.

¹⁴ *Midō kanpaku ki* Kankō 7 (1010).8.29, vol. 2, 74. For a translation, see Hérail 1987–1991, vol. 2, 423.

¹⁵ See for example *Midō kanpaku ki* Kankō 3 (1006).10.20; Kankō 7 (1010).11.28; Chōwa 2 (1013).9.14; and Chōwa 4 (1015).7.15, vol. 1, 196; vol. 2, 82, 243; vol. 3, 20.

¹⁶ *Taiki*, Kyūan 1 (1145).4.2 and 14, vol. 23, 149. See also Hashimoto 1964, 55–58, who provides a reconstructed plan of the library building. Yōrinaga gives the storehouse's measures as c. 7 by c. 3.3 meters, with a height of c. 3.6 meters. The building was located at the northwest corner of Yōrinaga's villa compound.

such as histories of Japan, diaries in Sinitic, and family records, not works in Japanese. The book collection of Yōrinaga's contemporary Fujiwara no Michinori 藤原通憲 (1106–1159) also contained only Sinitic titles. This we know from the extant catalogue of Michinori's library that was compiled around 1160. This *Tsūken nyūdō zōsho mokuroku* 通憲入道藏書目録 (Catalogue of the Library of the Lay Priest Michinori) provides fascinating insights in the reading habits of a member of the high nobility, as does Yōrinaga's journal.¹⁷

The extent to which such wealthy book collectors were willing to open up their libraries to others was probably slim, but it did happen. We do have reports of lesser nobles seeing precious books in such elite private libraries, and in the case of Yōrinaga we know that he had intensive contact with scholars and academy students at his home.¹⁸

4 Visible and invisible books

It is customary among book scholars to distinguish three categories of books for this period, namely 'Chinese books' (*kanseki* 漢籍; sometimes these were printed books, *koshōbon* 古鈔本); 'Buddhist canonical texts' in Chinese translation (*kyōten* 經典, var. *buten* 仏典); and 'Japanese books' (*wahon* 和本 or *kokusho* 国書), including collections of poetry in Japanese (*waka* 和歌). The striking thing is that books in Japanese remain invisible in library infrastructures, until the twelfth century. For monastic libraries treated below this is explained by the fact that canonical texts and their commentaries were always written in Sinitic. For the more worldly libraries it must be assumed that they aimed to present an emphatically scholarly typology of knowledge, which did include Sinitic verse and prose but nothing in Japanese. The first extant Heian book catalogue is representative in that respect. *Nihonkoku genzaisho mokuroku* 日本国見在書目録 (Catalogue of Books Extant in Japan, 891) is in fact a list of books imported from China, rather than an attempt to also cover books produced in Japan. The few Japanese works in Sinitic in this list seem to have been included by accident.¹⁹ The categories that organise this inventory draw on Chinese dynastic bibliographies and the rhetorical effect of this valuable catalogue is to present 'Chinese books' as signs of state power.

¹⁷ Smits 2009.

¹⁸ Togawa 1998, 66.

¹⁹ Kornicki 1998, 422–423.

Of course, there were books in Japanese around and they were collected, but one does not find them in records of book collections, but glimpses them in more personal sources. The author of *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (c. 975–after 1019), for example, in her memoirs notes that she does have books in her living quarters within the royal palace.

There is also a pair of larger cupboards crammed to bursting point. One is full of old poems and tales that have become the home of countless insects which scatter in such an unpleasant manner that no one cares to look at them anymore; the other is full of Chinese books that have lain unattended ever since he who carefully collected them has passed away.²⁰

Books in Japanese indeed tended to be collections of and manuals for poetry, or fictional tales and anecdotal collections; and while the first had gained social standing since the early tenth century, the latter category did not. Such books were read, even avidly, but not given a visible place in libraries.

Likewise, much if not most of the information about available book titles and their uses comes from personal journals and may also be gleaned from the many ‘classified books’ (*ruisho* 類書), that is, huge compendia that categorised knowledge gleaned from other sources and which one may think of as libraries in book format.

5 Monastic libraries

In 1094, the monk Eichō 永超 (1014–1095) compiled a catalogue of Buddhist writings available in temples in Nara and Kyoto and their surroundings, *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域伝灯目録 (Catalogue of [Works that] Transmit the [Dharma] Lamp in the Eastern Regions). That he could do so indicates that scholarly monastic libraries were catalogued at certain intervals and that they could be consulted by visiting monks from other monasteries.²¹ Eichō (1014–1095) lists 78 sutra categories for known religious treatises and sutra commentaries by a variety of East Asian monks. Often mentioned are the catalogues of Buddhist books brought over from the Chinese mainland by eight Japanese monks throughout the ninth

²⁰ Murasaki Shikibu *nikki*, 497; trans. Bowring 1996, 55. See also Kamens 2007, 129. Although Murasaki was regularly reading these ‘Chinese’ books, they were not collected by herself, even though she was trained to read such books from an early age, but by her late husband.

²¹ Inoue 1948; see also Kornicki 1998, 420–421. For more catalogues of monastic libraries, see Ogawa 2009, 50–51. For their relationship to ideal sets of a complete Buddhist canon, see also Ochiai 1998.

century and collectively referred to as 'catalogues [of books] brought over [from China]' (*shōrai mokuroku* 諸来目録). Together they underline the emphatically East Asian, rather than Japanese, context of a living Buddhist corpus of texts.

Heian monastic libraries and their scriptoria have been little studied. Unlike the eighth and early ninth centuries, for which we have in recent years accumulated considerable information,²² the world of late ninth through twelfth centuries remains rather a closed book when it comes to the collections and their usage of the many monasteries that existed in Heian Japan. The assumption is that by and large monastic libraries functioned as they did in the eighth century, although we cannot be sure. Obviously, there were monks who wrote often extensive treatises and commentaries on religious subjects. For these they had access to large stores of Buddhist writings; they must have found these repositories in either their own or other monastic libraries. Occasionally we hear of scholarly monks lending each other books from their own collections.

Japan's early monastic libraries are credited with instituting a special protective device: they allegedly imported cats from China as early as the eighth century, to protect books from damage by mice and rats.

Incidentally, it is in the monastic libraries that we find printed books manufactured in Heian Japan. The so-called 'temple prints' (*ji'inban* 寺院版) from the eleventh and twelfth centuries contained religious texts, usually sutras, printed by temples. This printing was done in commission, at the behest of wealthy patrons within the court nobility.²³ These printed texts were stored in the monasteries' sutra repositories (*kyōzō* 経蔵); their function was not to be read, but to result in the accumulation of merit (*kudoku* 功德) that came from the reproduction of scriptures. The printing of sutras was in essence a deluxe version of the long-standing practice of sutra copying (*shakyō* 写経).

6 The book as object

When in 757 the Bureau of Books and Drawings was established, it was stipulated that one of its duties was the manufacturing of paper, ink, and writing brushes. The reason for this was the close relationship between places of storage and places of production of books; the Bureau, then, provides one more example of the fairly

²² In English, see for example Lowe 2014a and 2014b. Peter Kornicki, on the other hand, is more sober about our knowledge of eighth-century monastic libraries. Kornicki 1998, 367.

²³ Nojiri 2015, 9–10.

universal overlap of *bibliotheca* and scriptorium. One of the Bureau's important tasks throughout the ninth century was to copy sutras at the behest of the royal family and its close entourage.²⁴ Increasingly, especially after the Bureau of Books and Drawings became defunct, monasteries throughout the country became the place where sutras were copied, often in a lavish execution, for karmic merit but also in the continuing endeavour to obtain complete sets of an ever-dynamic Buddhist 'canon' (*issaikyō* 一切經).²⁵ The copying of non-religious texts was also a constant, but on a much smaller scale and the extent to which this happened in an institutionalised setting is unclear; anecdotal evidence from journals suggest that this happened very much as a personal initiative by individuals. The bulk of book production (that is, copying of books) in Heian Japan concerned religious texts, specifically sutras; books were as much, if not more, powerful objects than they were texts for reading.²⁶

7 Conclusion

To sum up, in the classic court age of Heian Japan the institutional libraries of the court seem in the first place to have been symbolic repositories of knowledge that spoke of the state's omniscience and less hubs of readership and study. Active access to that knowledge was not their purpose. Something similar may, on occasion, have been the case with several monastic libraries. The one obvious exception, that is, repositories of books as part of a shared cultural canon that was actively read and studied, were the academic book collections with official and quasi-official status. Many individuals possessed books, sometimes large amounts of them, and read avidly. Many readers were writers, too. Yet intriguingly, the records we have of institutional libraries do not tell such readers' histories.

²⁴ Ono 1944, 57–60. The copying of sutras at the behest of royals had in the eighth century been outsourced to the Office of Sutra Transcription (*shakyōjo* 写経所), but this semi-official government bureau ceased to exist with the move to the new capital in 794 and this responsibility returned to the Bureau of Books and Drawings (*zushoryō*). For the *shakyōjo*, see Lowe 2017, 122–134.

²⁵ Nojiri 2015, 7–9; Ochiai 1998.

²⁶ The ritual efficacy of a book as powerful object is proven, among others, by the Heian practice of burying sutras at sacred sites. See Moerman 2007; Nojiri 2015, 9.

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