INTRODUCTION
Charting the Course

In the sixth month of 736, during the Tenpyō era in the reign of Emperor Shōmu, a Japanese diplomatic mission set out for the kingdom of Silla, on the Korean peninsula. The envoys (kenshiragishi 遣新羅使) undertook the mission during a period of strained relations with the country of their destination, met with adverse winds and disease during the voyage, and returned empty-handed. The only good thing to have come out of that journey, it seems, was a literary representation of it, which appears in Book Fifteen of the poetic anthology Man'yōshū 万葉集 (or 萬葉集, last dated poem 759). The 145 Japanese poems (15: 3578–3722) and their Sino-Japanese (kanbun) headnotes and footnotes constitute the longest poetic sequence in Man'yōshū and one of the earliest Japanese literary travel narratives (for an overview of the typology, ontogeny, and orthography of Man'yōshū, see Appendix B).3

The sequence is something of a Man'yōshū in miniature, since it includes examples of all three major contemporary poetic forms: tanka 短歌 ("short poem," normally of thirty-one syllables [morae] arranged in 5-7-5-7-7 order), chōka 長歌 ("long poem," of indeterminate length, but also [in its mature form] in 5-7 syllabic order, with a 7-7 ending), and sedōka 旋頭歌 ("head-repeating poem," of thirty-eight syllables arranged in 5-7-7-5-7-7 order).4 It also encompasses all three main thematic genres into which Man'yōshū is conventionally divided: sōmon 相聞 (poems in which the poet is thinking of another, usually a lover), banke 挽歌 (elegies), and zōka 雑歌 (miscellaneous verses, originally by and large of a public character). Alexander Vovin (2009b, 36) adds that Book Fifteen is also “the most important Western Old Japanese text from a linguistic standpoint, as it includes many grammatical forms and constructions not found anywhere else.” This inclusivity of form, genre, and expression combines with a diachronic quality provided by a dozen or so “old poems” quoted in the text and with
a very broad set of seasonal conventions and poetic images, with the result that a reading of it becomes a cartography of much of the *Man'yōshū* poetic world.

The central question for this book about the Silla poems lies in what Seamus Heaney calls the “frontier of writing, . . . the line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature.” All writing, however factual, crosses this frontier, but the question assumes particular urgency when a text specifically calls attention to the historical events on which it claims to be based. What follows here will navigate this frontier, discovering what is known about the actual journey to Silla of 736–737 and the assumptions and concerns that guided its recreation as a literary artifact and then helped shape the horizon(s) of expectation of its contemporary readers.

This extended poetic “thick description” will begin by taking a bearing on the basic themes and organization of the sequence and the verifiable historical events to which the sequence refers. We will then set out through the sequence at a more deliberate pace, exploring its internal operations and how its meaning is generated in part through its own internal structure. Thereafter in Chapter 3 we will chart the wider historical forces against which the work was composed and initially received and then introduce literary, religious, foreign, and performative traditions that bear upon it in Chapter 4. Our journey will conclude in Chapter 5 with speculation on yet another element in the matrix of meaning: the shaping force of the editorial imagination. We will refer to the envoy poet who initially collected the poems as the “compiler” (with the understanding that there may have been more than one); that person may also have added an indeterminate number of headnotes and footnotes (since he would have known the provenance of the envoy verses) and perhaps new poems as well. The person who later put the sequence into its final form, most likely adding new poems and perhaps other notes to improve the sequentiality of the whole, will be referred to as the “editor” (again, there may have been several). Reception of the sequence has tended to shift over the years from accepting all the verses as the work of a historical envoy or envoys to positing an increasingly large number of fictional contributions by a later editor. Neither the names of the compiler and editor nor the extent of their contributions will likely ever be determined; all we can do here is suggest who they may have been and what they may have done, based on comparisons to cognate sections of the anthology.

In looking at the relation of the actual events to their literary iterations, therefore, we will not for a moment suggest that the account must be taken at face value. The sequence of the envoys to Silla is *histoire*—history and story. Even if, as many contend, most of the explanatory Sino-Japanese headnotes and footnotes to the groups of verses were written by a member of the historical mission itself, and even if all the poems were composed by
the men and women to whom they are ascribed, the final account can never be more than what Paul John Eakin calls “a special kind of fiction,” a retrospective (to varying degree) and artificial narrativization of lived experience. Even if poetry “has the human heart as seed and myriad words as leaves,” as the “Kana Preface” to Kokinshū would later insist, it cannot be transparently autobiographical; each poem reflects just one persona of the man or woman who composed it, performing his or her life in response to conventions, precedents, and social desiderata. Much of this present volume will be devoted to exploring what those conventions, precedents, and desiderata were. And how much more fictive is the work if its constituent verses were later sequenced by some person or persons, and still more if that other person or persons rewrote verses or added new ones composed by himself or themselves. Indeed, it has even been proposed that the entire Silla account was invented *ab ovo* after the fact and that none of the participants in the historical journey were involved in its literary representation. It must therefore be kept in mind that references to “the envoys” in this volume may refer to the historical travelers, to characters in a fictive scenario, or to entities somewhere between. We will by no means try to use the account and its poems to suggest what the historical envoy poets “must have been feeling” when they composed this or that verse. Our mission here is quite different—to use what we know of contemporary history, literature, and culture to make sense of how this poetic sequence, like a modern historical novel, came into being, and to explore what historical, literary, and cultural perspectives may be marshaled to conceive of ways in which it might have been composed by its authors then received by its contemporary readers, while by no means positing a reductive uniformity of reception.

We will travel in the company of premodern and modern Japanese commentators, and their observations add further layers to the hermeneutic palimpsest. Man'yōshū has been subjected to more divergent ideological and theoretical approaches on its way to (and after) canonization than any other work in the Japanese literary corpus (see Appendix B for a brief sketch of the early reception history of the work). In the Early Modern period (1600–1868) the anthology became the beneficiary of the rigorous philology of Keichū 契沖 (1640–1701) and then was subsequently construed by Nativists (Kokugakusha), notably Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697–1769), as an indigenous antidote to pervasive Chinese influence and as a repository of Japanese “sincerity” in opposition to imported continental artifice. After the Meiji restoration of ostensibly direct imperial rule, Man'yōshū was reconceived by some as a national anthology demonstrating a primordial (and instructive) harmony between the emperor and all his subjects. In the first decades of the last century, it was again recast as a source of *Volkslied* that sang of national spirit and ethnic commonality. In response to Western Romanticism and Naturalism, verses in the anthology
also came to be seen by some, such as Takeda Yūkichi 武田祐吉 (1886–1958), as lyrical expressions of the Self, a perspective that gave way in the prewar and wartime period to a return in some ways to Nativist interpretations, with the collection being touted as a superior version of the Chinese classic *Shi jing* (The book of songs, ca. 1000–600 BCE). In the words of the editors of *The Manyōshū*, the Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai English translation (1940, xiv) of about a quarter of the anthology, “No matter what may be the alleged allegorical virtue of the Chinese poem [that begins *Shi jing*], no one will fail to discover in the Japanese piece [that begins *Man’yōshū*] an artistic masterpiece, combining sincerity with dignity, and elegance with pastoral simplicity—a charming revelation of the close intimacy and friendliness that characterized the relationship between sovereign and subject in ancient Japan.” Postwar reactions to such nationalism either emphasized moments in the anthology oppositional to state hegemony or focused on philology and textual criticism (notably in the work of Omodaka Hisataka 沢瀉久孝, 1890–1968) and demonstrated an increasing willingness (in the writings of Itō Haku 伊藤博 [1920–2003], for example) to read *Man’yōshū* verses not necessarily as unvarnished biographical reifications of declarative sentiment but sometimes as fictional creativity. The relationship between the anthology and the variegated Chinese literary tradition has been amplified in depth, notably by Kojima Noriyuki, Tatsumi Masaaki, and Haga Norio. And the advent of cultural studies and postmodern theory has fostered a heightened sensitivity to the political and cultural forces that gave rise to the collection and has highlighted the historicity and contingency of our own field of inquiry. An awareness of reader positionality in the *longue durée* of *Man’yōshū* scholarship is one characteristic of much current writing on the work, as is a concurrent effort to evaluate as objectively as possible the equivalent being-in-time of its creators and early readers. As expressed by Furuhashi Nobutaka (1996, 8),

*Man’yōshū* is Japan’s oldest collection of *waka* and as such has been the object of various illusions—that its constituent poems sing of the simple lives of the common folk, and so forth. For *Man’yōshū* research to be worthy of the name, it must shatter these illusions and insofar as possible treat the collection objectively, as a historical artifact. By “objectively, as a historical artifact,” I mean that it must reject ideology and interpret *Man’yōshū* insofar as possible as ancient poetry, as an ancient anthology. I must add the proviso “insofar as possible” because we inhabit contemporary society and inhabit it inescapably.11

Similarly, Shinada Yoshikazu (2000 and 2001) has deconstructed the notion of *Man’yōshū* as “a classic of the people” (“kokumin no koten”) and illuminated the ideological motivations behind that modern invention.12

Readings further proliferated after *Man’yōshū* itself became a foreign text. English-language studies, including the present one, transpose into a dif-
ferent key many of the perspectives of Japanese scholarship, just as some recent Japanese ones assimilate aspects of Anglo-American or European critical theory. The earliest extended treatment of *Man'yōshū* poetry (but only *ebōka*) in English was that of Frederick Victor Dicks (1838–1915) a century ago (1906), which in its condemnation of Chinese influence advertised its Nativist affinities (“the introduction of Chinese civilization . . . neither consolidated the State nor affirmed the throne, while it arrested the language, altered the nature of the religion, and kept in bondage to an alien past the intellect of the country for a millennium and a half” [xxv]). Early Western studies shared as well the strong philological and linguistic perspective that dominated Japanese work on the collection over much of its history; notable in this regard was the first complete English translation of the work, accomplished by a Dutch scholar, Jan Lodewyk Pierson (1893–1966), from 1929 to 1963. A different approach to translation, combining scholarly rigor and poetic sensibility, characterizes the work of Edwin A. Cranston (1993), whose *Gem-Glistening Cup* includes about a third of the original. The first thorough English-language contextualization of *Man'yōshū* within the entire sweep of Japanese court poetry, that of Robert H. Brower (1923–1988) and Earl Miner (1926–2004) a half-century ago (which was indebted to the perspectives of Konishi Jin’ichi 小西甚一 [1915–2007]), was structured on a belletristic armature informed by principles of comparative literature. That belletristic view was also adopted by Ian Hideo Levy (1984) (whose work is dedicated to his mentor, the *Man’yōshū* and Comparative Literature scholar Nakanishi Susumu 中西進). Therein, Levy evaluated the contribution of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro 柿本人麻呂 (fl. ca. 689–700) in terms of the development of the individual lyric voice. A biographical and belletristic approach also characterized the study by Paula Doe (1982) of Ōtomo no Yakamochi 大伴家持 (718?–85). Gary Ebersole (1989), Herbert E. Plutchow (1990), and Kevin Collins (1997) tempered the belletristic view by foregrounding the religious and ritual functions of, for example, funerary or land-viewing verse (which Levy, too, described at length). Roy Andrew Miller has critiqued the work of neo-Nativist proponents of Japanese particularity (*Nihonjinron*) and repeatedly drawn attention to contributions from the Korean peninsula to ancient Japanese civilization, as has David B. Lurie (2001) in his exploration of early Japan’s encounter with continental literacy. An objective return to the Chinese elements of *Man’yōshū* after centuries of Nativist interpretation characterizes as well the recent doctoral dissertations of Jeremy R. Robinson (2004) and Jason P. Webb (2004). Anne Commons (2009) has likewise drawn attention to Chinese appropriations by Hitomaro, and also to the role of performativity and fictionality in his ostensibly “personal” verses. But Torquil M. S. Duthie, in his doctoral dissertation of 2005, has shown that the imperial perspective of some earlier Japanese scholars also encompassed an element of truth, in that Hitomaro’s
public verses were composed with an ideological motive, to demonstrate in poetic terms the divinity and charisma of the imperial line of Tenmu (631–686) and Jitō (645–703). The paragraphs above turn “the accomplishment of many years into an hour-glass” and represent the vast fields of interpretation as an orderly succession of paradigms rather than as a complex negotiation over centuries. And in any event a reception history of the sequence of the envoys to Silla will not be our purpose in this volume (though in reviewing the extensive literature that speculates about the identity of the anonymous poet[s], compiler[s], and editor[s] in the sequence, Chapter 5 necessarily assumes something of a diachronic character). We instead are setting out to apply apposite insights and perspectives to one focal point in the anthology. Navigating via the great hermeneutic circle route, we propose to employ germane aspects of Man’yōshū scholarship, organized in the following chapters under various contextual rubrics, to illuminate one of its parts, the Silla sequence, in the hope that, reciprocally, that sequence will transcend its own boundaries and shed reflected light on aspects of the anthology as a whole and its multivalent cultural ambit.

Certain thematic landmarks will come into particular focus as we progress through the stages of our journey. One is the degree to which people and ideas were traversing national boundaries at the time the envoys’ sequence was created. The very raison d’être of the historical embassy to Silla was to pursue foreign policy in an age of visitors to Japan from as far away as India (the monk Bodhisena [704–760] arrived in Nara the month after our envoys left for Silla) and goods from lands distant as Persia. To be sure, Man’yōshū is unequivocally a collection of native verse almost entirely in the vernacular rather than in Chinese, the shared scholarly language of East Asia at that time. It does contain some of Japan’s earliest extant poems, and as such remains a vital preserve of the native poetic spirit. But it took shape during an era of rigorous and far-reaching examination and assimilation of foreign prototypes that would not be equaled in intensity until the Meiji period more than a millennium later, and its myriad leaves reflect in myriad ways the complex Easternization then occurring, often through the agency of Korean immigrants and their descendants. Even Kakino-moto no Hitomaro, that paragon of the native voice, applied his knowledge of Chinese poetry and prose to his own vernacular creativity. And the poets of the Kyushu poetic circle, led by Ōtomo no Tábito 大伴旅人 (665–731) and Yamanoue no Okura 山上憶良 (660–733?), appropriated a wide range of Chinese texts from the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions to create a new Sino-Japanese amalgam that emphasized the visual reception of the written word more than the aural performativity characteristic of previous native song. Chinese examples may, in fact, have been brought to bear on Man’yōshū in antithetical but complementary ways, pro-
gressively informing the style of the poems in the anthology even as they motivated Ōtomo no Yakamochi to complete the twenty-volume collection and thus preserve the vernacular cultural heritage in the midst of increasing courtly sinophilia.¹⁵

Nor (as indicated above) are the verses in _Man'yōshū_ necessarily forthright and uncomplicated expressions of their makers’ own specific experiences, despite the claims of poetic sincerity (magokokoro) that have characterized much of the interpretative history of the collection. Instead, _Man’yōshū_ is full of assumed personae, including proxy poetry written by one poet on behalf of someone perhaps less artistically gifted, poems composed by one person and then quoted by someone else in a different environment, pastiches where one poet simply altered a word or two of an earlier composition, poems written in the guise of others out of sympathy for their condition, and outright fictional creations involving, say, a dialogue between two imagined destitute men or conversations between a courtly traveler and alluring female immortals. It is of course just as difficult to avoid biographicality as it is to approach it; even fantasies and lies tell truths about an author. And “sincerity” may mean the representation of the human condition rather than specific biographical facts. But contemporary courtly readers of the poetry collected in _Man’yōshū_ would not have naively taken all of it at face value. The predominant voice in _Man’yōshū_ is the lyrical voice, and it sings of some of the most poignant and timeless elements of the human experience, but it is not necessarily one of direct biographical “sincerity,” even if such authorial intent could be proven.¹⁶ One of the most passionately disputed questions about the Silla sequence, and one that still cannot be answered, is how much (if any) was the work of the historical envoys, and how much was the result of additions by a later poet-editor adopting an envoy persona.

Another thematic landmark will temper a reading of all the poems in _Man’yōshū_ as isolated creative moments. Until recently the lion’s share of critical work on the collection was devoted to the decipherment and exegesis of individual verses, trying simply to make sense of their orthography and to parse their archaic vocabulary and grammar. And most moderns think of the work (when they think of it at all) in terms of a few of its greatest monuments and not of the reticulated groups of poems that occupy so much of the complete text. It is true that some poems in the anthology were composed to stand alone. But many _Man’yōshū_ poems were composed as sets, either by individuals or by groups of poets, or else were assembled into sequences later on by poets or editors, some according to principles of association and progression premonitory of those that would be exploited in the Heian period in _Kokinshū_. Later poets and copyists also felt free on occasion to alter earlier work. In fact, groups of poems by groups of poets constitute one of the basic forms of _Man’yōshū_ poetic expression. The se-
quence of the envoys to Silla is, again, the longest of such extended *Man’yō-
shū* compositions. The common practice of appending one or more short
poetic codas (*hanka*) to longer *chōka* was another aspect of this impulse to-
ward concatenation, as were poetic exchanges. Still another was experimen-
tation in combining Japanese poetry with long Sino-Japanese prefaces. Such
extended compositions have been discussed elsewhere in terms of their im-
 pact on the development of Japanese tale literature (*monogatari*), and they
reflect the growth of conscious literary creativity. As in the case of linked
verse (*renge*), much of the pleasure of reading these groups of poems in
*Man’yōshū* lies in trying to discover lexical and thematic links that animate
them (at least one short linked verse is included in *Man’yōshū* itself). But a
group of poems does not always a sequence make, and much recent debate
centers on whether this or that group was meant to be a sequence at all,
and if so, how the constituent poems interrelate.17 Inevitably the effort re-
turns to the conundrum of authorial intent, and in conjecturing about the
possible interrelationships between contiguous verses, subsequent gener-
gations turn texts from readerly into writerly ones. Sequentialization may thus
be the result of operations both at the site of poetic composition and also
later in the study of a poet, editor, or reader. Exploration of the pervasive-
ness of the sequential motive in the collection is one of the most important
contributions of modern *Man’yōshū* scholarship, even as the precise work-
ings of that motive in this or that environment continue to provoke spirited
and illuminating debate.

Orality, sociality, and extemporaneity were critical elements of much
*Man’yōshū* poetic practice, reflecting the central role that various forms of
song and poetry fulfilled in ancient life. This social nexus in turn raises the
issue of stereotypicity and conventionality. *Man’yōshū* encompasses works
of originality and genius. But it also includes hundreds of verses that were
probably never meant to be entirely original and were instead composed in
response to social or ritual requirements at the locus of composition. “Con-
ventionality” is generally a pejorative term in modern poetic criticism, but it
was not so in a poetic world founded on notions of the value of prece-
dent, the importance of established religious rites, and the prevalence of banquet
composition that valorized the right word at the right time to “fit in,” both
socially and sequentially.18 And yet *Man’yōshū* exhibits a wider stylistic and
lexical variety and a greater range of experimentation than do any of the
subsequent imperial poetic anthologies (a category in which *Man’yōshū* is
not traditionally included). Consensus about what was worthy of inclusion
in a poetic collection was in the very process of taking shape (a debate
that never stopped thereafter, certainly), and the resultant variety ironically
makes *Man’yōshū* more immediately approachable for moderns than any of
the subsequent imperial anthologies, which are more rule-bound, therefore
requiring more knowledge of those rules to appreciate.
The above thematic landmarks map an approach to poetic praxis, both in terms of composition and apprehension, that is often alien to modern conceptions. The sequence and the anthology are products of a world vastly removed from ours in time and space, and a reading of them sometimes requires a suspension of what we inherently perceive as “normal” in some of the most fundamental areas of human experience, a situation analogous to what Leslie Kurke (2000) calls the “strangeness” of poetic practice in archaic Greece. This was a world in which the future was foretold by reading the cracks in bones, in which illness was attributed to malevolent spirits, and in which the soul might slip its bonds and wander. And yet it was also a world of love between husbands and wives, of missing hearth and home, and of delight in the changing seasons, sometimes expressed in poetry that some today still find immediately and intensely moving. The frontier between the foreign and the familiar is the source of much of the attraction and value of Man’yōshū to us today, and the anthology holds us at once by its often eloquent expression of universals and by its assumption of a common sense that is no longer common at all.

The Silla sequence provides the opportunity for literary archaeology of the first order, allowing us to disinter evidence about some of the most exciting dialectics in early Japanese literary history: between oral practice and the tentative beginnings of the written tradition, between religious ritual and literary art, between native and imported artistic systems, and between communal expression and the development of the individual literary consciousness. We have chosen to approach the Man’yō world through a reading of one of its particularly representative and evocative segments. Let our voyage begin, then, with a complete translation of that text.