

# Huang Zunxian *Riben zashi shi* (Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects from Japan) (1879)



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Huang Zunxian

Huang Zunxian was born in Guangdong Province in 1848. He learned *Qian jia shi* (Poems of 1000 Masters) from his great-grandmother at an early age. At the age of 3, he went to a private school, and from the age of 10, he learned to write poetry. In 1876, he passed the *xiangshi* (provincial exams) in Beijing and became a *juren* (successful candidate). In the same year, a distant relative, He Ruzhang, was appointed as Qing's (China's) first Minister, and Huang Zunxian went to Japan as secretary. In 1879, he completed *Riben zashi shi* (*Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects from Japan*). In 1882, he was appointed as Consul General in San Francisco, and in 1886, he returned to Japan to work on *Riben guo zhi* (*Treatises on Japan*), a full-fledged book on Japanese studies, which was completed in 1887. In 1890, he was appointed as Consul General in London, and 1 year later he was appointed Consul

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General in Singapore. He returned to China in 1894 to become Chief of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of Jiangning. In 1895, depressed over the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, he became one of the founders of the Society for the Enhancement of Learning, founded by Kang Youwei. In 1896, he published the journal *Shiwu Bao* (Chinese Progress) and invited Liang Qichao to Shanghai to be its chief editor. In 1897, he was appointed salt intendant of Hunan Province, where he opened a new-style school, the Current Affairs Academy, and published journals such as *Xiang Bao* (Hunan Newspaper) and *Xiangxue Xinbao* (Hunan Studies News). The Academy attracted such talents as Liang Qichao and Tang Caichang, making Hunan the most progressive province in China. After 1898, he became sickly and so returned to his hometown to lead a more comfortable life while continuing to make efforts to promote elementary education and enlighten the public. He died in 1905 at the age of 57.

Huang Zunxian was born in 1848, 6 years after the Opium War, and when he was 2 years old the Taiping Rebellion took place. He grew up during a time when the Self-Strengthening Movement (or Westernization), conducted by Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan, was making progress in adopting Western-style military-industrial technology while preserving the traditional ruling system. When he arrived in Japan in 1877 (Meiji 10) as secretary of the Chinese Legation in Japan, the country was in the midst of a major reform project that aimed to transform its laws, the Civil Code, educational system, and economic system, all to be modeled after those of the West.

Huang Zunxian sought to get to know this fledgling Eastern island nation thoroughly and to inform the Chinese people of its national situation. He began writing an exhaustive study of Japan, *Riben Guo Zhi* (*Treatises on Japan*), and, at the same time, he completed a smaller book, which he called *Riben Zashi Shi* (*Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects from Japan*) and which was published in 1879 by the Interpreter's College (Tongwen Guan).

Huang Zunxian observed the various phenomena of the Meiji Restoration with great interest, but when he first wrote *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects from Japan*, he was not entirely convinced of its success. As he himself later wrote, when he arrived in Japan in 1877, the establishment of a constitution and a legislature was still being debated. In terms of economic development, the main export was green tea to the United States; raw silk was still in the process of being improved. There was still some skepticism in Japan as to whether the Restoration would be a success. Because Huang Zunxian was not good at Japanese, and his primary sources of information were kangakusha (Japanese scholars of Chinese studies), he was in some ways influenced by their negative views towards Western scholarship. In the section on "Emperor Loyalists" (kinnōka), he points out that the Japanese studied Confucianism and thus learned for the first time the wrongness of the warrior class's monopoly of political power, and that, ultimately, the idea of the imperial loyalists was born out of Chinese studies.

These developments are proof of the power of Chinese studies. How dare you defy the nation by abolishing Chinese studies that have served the nation so well!

These passages seem to reflect the grief and indignation of the kangakusha (Japanese scholars of Chinese studies), who were discarded at the Restoration against their prior expectations as easily as if they had been thrown down on the ground.

That is not to say that Huang Zunxian could not recognize the merits of the new Meiji government. In the “Civilization” section, he writes:

The venerable old country has brought about the Restoration, and  
Everything has changed unexpectedly with the tide of the times.

In his explanation, he praises the Meiji Restoration almost without reservation, saying that “splendid policies are uncountable” and “various policies were renewed in a dazzling manner.” He poses no objection to the military and economy and seems to be slightly less keen to discuss a legislature. What he unequivocally praises is a new school system, with a well-organized curriculum and careful attention to the gradual increase of difficulty.

However, Huang Zunxian was not only interested in Japan’s new regime; he was also curious about the manners and customs as well as the details of everyday life, from Shinto rituals, marriage and funerals, *kōdan* (oral storytelling), *rakugo* (a popular form of comic monologue), and *sadō* (tea ceremony), to *musume-gidayū* (female *gidayū* chanting with shamisen), *Ebisukō* (Shinto rituals honoring the deity Ebisu), and *jinrikisha* (rickshaws). In terms of coverage, there are more sections on manners and customs than those related to the Restoration and the new regime. This may reflect the fact that the new Meiji government had yet to achieve much in the way of concrete results, and, in part, may also be because manners and customs are more amenable subject matters for poetry. It should be noted, however, that one of Huang Zunxian’s main interests in Japan was its folklore, which has been nurtured over a long history.

Huang Zunxian himself sent many Chinese students to Japan as part of his activities after returning to China, but it was Japan’s modernity that appealed most to this later generation. They tried to deny Chinese traditions, and were also dismissive of Japanese traditions. Huang Zunxian was not. Never forgetting the value of traditional Chinese studies and the beauty of the Chinese tradition, Huang Zunxian also loved the Japanese tradition. His attitude in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects from Japan* could be called “learning from the past to know the new.”

Huang Zunxian, having acquired traditional Chinese learning, always tries to see things from a historical perspective. History repeats itself. Japan is trying very hard to send students to the West and to take in all things Western, just as it once sent students to the Tang Dynasty to learn about its culture. Huang Zunxian’s broad historical perspective, which is not limited to the immediate upheaval of the Meiji Restoration, naturally allows him to see phenomena in relative terms.

His historical research extends to smaller items as well. According to Chinese records, Japanese folding fans, which are found in the *Collection of Zhang Donghai* of the Ming dynasty, had already been introduced to China during the Song dynasty. Indeed, there are references to Japanese fans in Su Dongpo’s writings and in *Huangchao Leiyuan*. Since the cultural exchange between China and Japan is so

deep, an investigation into the history of each of these objects will reveal the depth of the past relationship between the two countries. The depth of the relationship between Japan and China in the fields of Chinese studies and Buddhism goes without saying.

Huang Zunxian's diplomatic strategy was that Japan and China, as well as Korea, should work in tandem with the United States to deal with Russia; he sees the promotion of friendship between China and Japan and the recognition of the deep cultural ties between the two countries as mutually reinforcing. Cultural affinity should lead to alliances, and the need for alliances should emphasize cultural affinity.

The origin of this sense of cultural affinity can be found in the following text, which he describes a scene he saw in Hirado, Nagasaki, when he arrived in Japan for the first time.

As I walked along the footpath, I saw wheat seedlings in a bright blue color where the setting sun had dyed them brightly. I saw some potatoes on the side of a private house, and when I tried to buy them and pay for them, they would not accept my money. The people were so simple and rustic, it was as if I had stepped into the Peach Blossom Valley.

He compares the idyllic simplicity of rural Japan to the legendary fairyland Peach Blossom Valley. His belief that ancient Chinese legacies may have been preserved in Japan is reinforced by the legend of the Qin dynasty's Xu Fu traveling to Japan (with hundreds of boys and girls in tow in search of the elixir of life for the First Emperor of Qin) and the Wa (Japanese) people saying, in the history of Wei, that they were descended from Taibo of Wu. The people of the Peach Blossom Valley hid in the seclusion of the mountain gorges to avoid the turmoil of war in the Qin Dynasty. Is Japan not also such a place?

In Japan, quite a bit of the Tang dynasty's legacy has been preserved. Many Chinese books that were lost in China have been kept in Japan. In a similar way, Huang Zunxian seems to have thought that some of China's ancient traditions might have been retained in Japan. He describes the *Sanshu no Jingi* (The Imperial Three Sacred Treasures) as follows:

There are three precious treasures handed down from an ancient Japanese deity: a sword, a mirror, and a seal, all of which belonged to the Qin Dynasty. [...] In fact, the Japanese of today are the same species as we are.

Huang Zunxian's detailed discussion of how people sat on the floor in ancient China without chairs, citing references to the fact, is probably intended to prove that the Japanese and Chinese are of "the same species."

In this way, Huang Zunxian attempted to understand Japanese culture and ethnicity through a kind of naive cultural anthropological approach that sought to clarify the history of the people by examining the lineage of cultural phenomena.

It is a somewhat unreasonable argument for Huang Zunxian to view Xu Fu of the Qin dynasty as if he were a Japanese ancestor. However, it is now almost an established theory that rice cultivation and its associated culture originated in the Jiangnan region of China. Huang Zunxian's initial feeling that the original image of

the Chinese rural community, the Peach Blossom Valley, could be found in rural Japan, cannot be said to be off the mark.

Huang Zunxian was the first Chinese to closely observe the Meiji Restoration, but at the same time, he cannot be forgotten as a proponent of the rather popular saying that Japan and China are of “the same species.” With his compound eye, he was able to view modern and ancient Japan with equal clarity as if in the same distance.

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