

Japanese Scholars' Perspectives on the Outlook on Life in Chinese Literature: A Case Study of Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha

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Abstract

Yoshikawa Kojiro's *History of Chinese Poetry* and Rokuro Shiha's *Loneliness in Chinese Literature*, as pivotal works in the study of ancient Chinese literature in the field of Japanese sinology, focus on the outlook of life in ancient Chinese literature and present notably divergent conclusions. While both scholars share a relatively consistent view on the predominantly pessimistic tone of Literature in the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties, their interpretations diverge significantly regarding Pre-Qin Literature and Tang Dynasty Literature. Yoshikawa argues that these two periods reflect an optimistic stance, contrasting sharply with Shiha's emphasis on the deepening "aloneness" in literary works. By comparing the content and perspectives of these two works, it becomes evident that their structural frameworks warrant critical scrutiny, while their thematic focuses and periodization methods markedly differ from the approaches of domestic scholars.

Keywords

Ancient literature; Japanese sinology; Yoshikawa Kojiro; Rokuro Shiha; *History of Chinese Poetry*.

1. Introduction

In the mid-20th century, Japanese sinologists Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha proposed their respective perspectives on the issue of the "View of Life" in Chinese literature. However, within Chinese academic circles, Shiha's work has not garnered the same level of attention as Yoshikawa's, and comparative studies of their works remain scarce. In 2020, Liang Yu pioneered a parallel examination of Yoshikawa and Shiha's research in her paper *Japanese Scholars' Interpretation of Outlook on Life in Chinese Literature*, briefly outlining the two scholars' viewpoints. Building upon this foundation, this paper conducts a systematic comparison of the arguments presented in Yoshikawa's *History of Chinese Poetry* and Shiha's *Loneliness in Chinese Literature*, elucidating their convergences and divergences, while critically reflecting on and evaluating their contributions.

2. Similarities in Their Perspectives

Although *History of Chinese Poetry* and *Loneliness in Chinese Literature* differ in their structural frameworks, both organize their content chronologically. In Yoshikawa Kojiro's *History of Chinese Poetry*, the author divides the evolution of the "View of Life" in ancient Chinese literature into four phases: the optimism of the Pre-Qin period, the pessimism of the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties, the restored optimism of the Tang Dynasty, and the "Sublation of Sorrow" in the Song Dynasty. Notably, Yoshikawa's analysis of the Han-Wei and Six Dynasties literature aligns most closely with Shiha's interpretations.

In *History of Chinese Poetry*, Yoshikawa Kojiro juxtaposes Xiang Yu's *Last Song* and Liu Bang's *Song of the Great Wind*, framing them as dialectical counterparts that contrast the voices of defeat and triumph. He argues that both works, whether expressing success or failure, reflect their authors' astonishment at abrupt reversals of fate. This shared sentiment signifies their recognition of the influence exerted by "Destiny" (命运) and "Providence" (天意) on human life. The line "But my good fortune wanes" explicitly underscores the deterministic role of "fortune" (时) in human agency, while "Whether my steed will fight, oh! I do not care" intensifies the portrayal of human helplessness before fate. For Liu Bang, the phrase "A great wind rises" acknowledges the contingent role of "fortune" (时) in his victory, while "Where can I find brave men, oh! to guard my four frontiers today!" betrays an undercurrent of anxiety about safeguarding gains against the potential transfer of Providence's favor. From this period onward, the perception of "Providence" (天) transitioned from the Pre-Qin conception in *The Book of Poetry*—characterized as a "Providence that rewards the virtuous and punishes the wicked" and a "trustworthy Providence"—to an awareness of humanity's subjugation to "the unknowable threads of destiny" This shift marked the inception of a pessimistic worldview toward life.

Subsequently, Sima Qian of the Han Dynasty articulated doubts about "Providence" (天) in his *Records of the Historian*. He argued that "the starvation of the virtuous Boyi appeared to be a twist of fate's mischief, while the premature death of Yan Hui, Confucius' most exemplary disciple, served as irrefutable evidence of this". These observations led Sima Qian to question the *Tao Te Ching's* assertion that "Providence shows no partiality, yet always sides with the good", embedding within his skepticism a profound recognition of life's capriciousness.

The five-character poetry of the Han Dynasty juxtaposed the fragility of human happiness with the resilience and permanence of nature. In *Nineteen Ancient Poems*, lines such as "Human life is not metal or stone—how can it endure?" and "Life is but a fleeting sojourn—longevity lacks stone's solidity" fully demonstrate contemporaries' lamentations over life's brevity. Correspondingly, the supremacy of nature and "Providence" (天道) became embedded in their thought, manifesting as a pessimistic perception of human existence.

During the Three Kingdoms period, Ruan Ji's *Poems of One's Heart* inherited the contrasts and reflections found in Han five-character poetry, elevating personal sorrows and joys expressed in earlier works to a universal human condition. In the thirty-second poem of *Poems of One's Heart*—"Human life is but dust and dew, while Providence stretches boundless and eternal"—Ruan Ji echoes the earlier dichotomy between human frailty and enduring "metal and stone," lamenting humanity's insignificance against Providence's immensity. The fourth poem expands this further with lines like "Seasons know no end, yet riches and honors never stay" and "At dawn, a fair youth; by dusk, an aged wraith", framing the loss of happiness as an inevitability for all. Here, the author abandons all hope for life's blessings or divine favor, epitomizing the zenith of pessimistic thought in Han-Wei and Six Dynasties literature.

Rokuro Shiha's research on the outlook of life in Chinese literature of this period aligns closely with Yoshikawa Kojiro's aforementioned views. Shiha dedicates a thematic analysis to Xiang Yu and his works, noting that Xiang Yu's writings exhibit a tendency to "ascribe all misfortunes to 'fortune' (时) and 'Providence' (天), ultimately fostering distrust toward these forces". Additionally, Shiha cites Dongfang Shuo's *Da Ke Nan* to illustrate the Han literary perspective that "achievement and failure hinge entirely on contemporary circumstances".

Building on his identification of the pessimistic undertones in Han literature, Shiha further elucidates a literary trend of resisting "fortune" and upholding self-integrity through works like Yang Xiong's *Jie Chao*. This analysis supplements and advances Yoshikawa's research, achieving a multidimensional understanding of the literary ethos of this specific period.

Furthermore, Rokuro Shiha extends his focus to literati of the Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties periods. He identifies in Ruan Ji's works "an emotion of existential isolation deemed humanity's fate," and traces the continuity of this "aloneness" in subsequent writers such as Yuan Can, Lu Ji, and Wang Xizhi. Yuan Can's *Biography of Mr. Miaode* states: "Since I alone remain sane, I cannot withstand the multitude. Now I too must taste this frenzied draught". Shiha interprets this as embodying an irreconcilable solitude alongside a pride akin to "Everyone is drunk while I wake up alone." Subsequently, literary works emerged that situated human existence within grand cosmic contexts, lamenting the universality of life's impermanence. Shiha categorizes Lu Ji's *Ode on Lamenting the Passing of Time* and Wang Xizhi's *The Orchid Pavilion* within this tradition, particularly noting the lines: "Ages are formed by generations passing, as men drift slowly toward dusk. What generation does not renew its people? What age can keep its people unchanged?" By juxtaposing human transience with cosmic permanence, these works highlight humanity's insignificance, reflecting the era's tragic perception of life—a view consistent with Yoshikawa Kojiro's analysis of Han-Wei and Six Dynasties literature.

To sum up, in their examinations of the outlook on life in Chinese literature of the Han-Wei and Six Dynasties, Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha converge in identifying a pessimistic shift that diverged from Pre-Qin traditions. Both scholars recognize that writers of this period increasingly acknowledged the deterministic power of "Providence"(天) and "fortune"(时), giving rise to profound lamentations over life's fragility and fate's caprice.

3. Divergences in Their Interpretations

Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha diverge primarily in their interpretations of Pre-Qin Literature and Tang Dynasty Literature regarding the "View of Life" in ancient Chinese literature. Broadly, Yoshikawa characterizes both periods as relatively optimistic phases, whereas Shiha emphasizes the "aloneness" in works by Qu Yuan, Song Yu, Li Bai, and Du Fu, asserting their fundamentally pessimistic undertones.

In *History of Chinese Poetry*, Yoshikawa acknowledges the skepticism and despair in *The Book of Poetry* and *The Ode of Chu*, yet argues: "Through these doubts and despair, the poets' vehement assertions of their convictions still convey a fervent anticipation for the restoration of righteousness—a spirit refusing to yield to fate's dominion". Thus, Yoshikawa concludes that the Pre-Qin literary outlook remains predominantly optimistic.

Rokuro Shiha also acknowledges the presence of doubt and despair in *The Book of Poetry* and *The Ode of Chu*. Moreover, he identifies a rebellious spirit in Qu Yuan's works. Analyzing Qu Yuan's writings, Shiha states: "(Qu Yuan) concludes his series of laments with a resolve for suicide. In *Li Sao*, even amidst relentless adversity, he persists in his belief in the fairness of "Providence". This reveals a shared starting point with Yoshikawa Kojiro's perspective. However, despite this common foundation, Shiha's analysis diverges markedly. In subsequent studies, Shiha adopts "aloneness" as his interpretive lens for Pre-Qin literature, examining works by Song Yu and others to highlight themes of "self-pity" and "self-sorrow"—sentiments absent in Qu Yuan's oeuvre. The emergence of "introspective examinations of the isolated self" in Song Yu's works signifies a deepening of aloneness in literary expression.

In the study of Pre-Qin Literature in China, Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha began with a shared consensus on Qu Yuan and his works but ultimately diverged in their interpretations.

Their analyses of Tang Dynasty Literature also reveal differences. Yoshikawa Kojiro, through his analyses of works by Li Bai, Du Fu, and Han Yu, concluded: "They were not merely passive observers but active strivers." In Yoshikawa's view, Li Bai's *Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting* reflects the poet's passion for nature's beauty which means his zest for life. By contrast, Du Fu's "Three Officials", "Three Partings", and *My Cottage Unroofed by Autumn Gales* embody

the poet's aspiration to realize political ideals and alleviate human misery while exposing societal darkness and the suffering of the people. This desire parallels the sentiments conveyed by Qu Yuan in *The Ode of Chu*: despite pervasive social and political corruption, the poets chose not to retreat but to strive for societal reform. Thus, Yoshikawa argues that Tang poetry radiates an optimistic, proactive spirit, countering the pessimistic Literature in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties.

Rokuro Shiha, however, offers a starkly different interpretation of Li Bai's *Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting*. Unlike Yoshikawa, who regarded it as "an appreciation of nature", Rokuro interprets the lines "Gazing on Mount Jingting, nor I am tired of him, nor he of me" as an expression of profound isolation—"Mutual gaze' and 'no weariness' signify regarding each other as equals, expressing that only this counterpart is the one who truly understands oneself....In this world, only Jingting Mountain truly understands him. Extending this logic, all humanity except the poet himself fails to qualify as meaningful counterparts." For Rokuro, Li Bai's works exude a lack of understanding between him and other human beings, which is the root of his loneliness. *A Dialogue in the Mountain* takes this further. The line "My mind carefree, I smile and give him no reply" reflects the author's inner tranquility and contentment, while "This is an earthly paradise beneath the sky" indicates a world detached from human society. This coexistence of solitude and serenity reveals Li Bai's attitude: rather than lamenting loneliness, he finds joy in it. Moreover, one might ask: was this self-imposed seclusion a conscious choice? If so, Li Bai's detachment from worldly affairs transcends the conventional sense of loneliness found in earlier literary traditions, marking a profound evolution in the poetic exploration of isolation.

Du Fu's loneliness stands in contrast to Li Bai's detachment from worldly affairs. Affected by the ravages of war, Du Fu and his family endured a life of displacement. Amidst his wanderings, he was compelled to engage extensively with society, yet found human connections profoundly unreliable. Consequently, Du Fu's solitude manifested as "loneliness within a crowd." In *One of The Two Poems in Playful Style to Dispel Melancholy*, Du Fu writes: "old friends still cling to their ways; new bonds fade like twilight mist". These lines poignantly lament the poet's struggle to forge intimate human connections, encapsulating his profound loneliness amid such fractured society. Lines such as "wealth-bound friends sever letters; their promises grow cold" lay bare the futility of trust in human relationships, while the destitution captured in "my starving children's pallid faces tell a tale untold" compels the poet to confront solitude and anguish. Under such circumstances, Du Fu ultimately realized that all individuals lead their own distinct lives. As captured in the lines "feathered splendor bears blossoms in blissful play, but childhood's bamboo steeds are joys I cannot claim today," people in the world inhabit vastly divergent realities—even his past self felt estranged from his present wandering identity. Thus, whether confronting the crowd or his own fractured existence, Du Fu perceived loneliness. This is perhaps the extreme of loneliness in Du Fu's poetry.

Overall, while Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha occasionally share similar perspectives, their methodologies and interpretive frameworks diverge to some extent. These differing approaches ultimately lead them to distinct conclusions in analyzing the outlook on life within ancient Chinese literature.

4. Critical Reflections on the Above Works

4.1. Organizational Frameworks

The structural frameworks of *History of Chinese Poetry* and *Loneliness in Chinese Literature* diverge from mainstream Chinese literary histories. These differences stem from the authors' distinct priorities in material selection and their evaluative criteria toward literary figures during their research processes.

Both works organize their content chronologically, employing uniform chapter headings without hierarchical distinctions between chapters and sections. In *History of Chinese Poetry*, the author allocates additional chapters to pivotal figures such as Ruan Ji and Li Bai, dedicating two chapters to each. In contrast, *Loneliness in Chinese Literature* adopts an egalitarian approach, assigning a single chapter to each literary figure regardless of their canonical status. Moreover, the latter work devotes extensive attention to Literature in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties, while offering minimal coverage of traditionally influential poets like Li Bai and Du Fu. Specifically, from Chapter 6 (*Xiang Yu*) to Chapter 15 (*Tao Yuanming*), ten chapters—over half of the book's seventeen chapters—are dedicated to Han-Wei and Six Dynasties writers, including Ruan Ji, Liu Kun, Zuo Si, Bao Zhao, and Yuan Can. By comparison, Du Fu and Li Bai are relegated to merely two subsequent chapters. This structural imbalance risks misleading readers about the broader landscape of Chinese literature and obscuring key focal points during the reading process.

It is crucial to note that Rokuro Shiha's chapter arrangement in *Loneliness in Chinese Literature* reflects his scholarly focus and interpretive lens. The extensive emphasis on Literature in the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties underscores his deep engagement with and expertise in this period. However, as an unfinished work, the book's omission of Song Dynasty literature and inadequate coverage of Tang Dynasty literature inevitably disorients readers. Coupled with the uneven distribution of content across historical eras, its structural organization remains subject to debate.

4.2. Thematic Design

In mainstream Chinese literary histories, concepts such as the "View Of Life" and "Aloneness" typically serve as analytical lenses rather than central research subjects. Yoshikawa Kojiro and Rokuro Shiha's innovation lies in positioning these themes as the central axis linking the entirety of Chinese literary history. However, certain analyses risk overinterpretation. Take their divergent readings of Li Bai's *Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting*: while Yoshikawa's interpretation of the poem merely as 'an appreciation of nature' may fall short, does the reading of 'Gazing on Mount Jingting, nor I am tired of him, nor he of me' as a metaphor for human alienation—extending it further to imply a sense of existential isolation—not risk overinterpretation?

Such interpretive tensions are not isolated to this example. Similar divergences emerge in their analyses of Du Fu's works. While it is undeniable that certain compositions across a poet's career may resonate with solitude, Rokuro's methodology—which elevates "Aloneness" to a universal hermeneutic key for reconstructing poetic worldviews and creative philosophies—risks overextension.

4.3. Periodization

Yoshikawa Kojiro's division of the View Of Life in ancient Chinese literature into four distinct stages in *History of Chinese Poetry* diverges from mainstream Chinese literary historiography. As a Japanese sinologist examining foreign culture from an external vantage point, Yoshikawa can distill characteristics of each era. However, those embedded within the Chinese culture—as both its creators and inheritors—cannot summarize in simple terms. The author contends that this divergence stems from the inherent perspectival differences between sinologists and Chinese scholars. Whether foreign sinologists study our culture or we engage with foreign literatures and cultures, clarity of thought necessitates distilling a cultural essence within a given period as a foundation for deeper inquiry. However, when confronting one's own cultural tradition—imbued with lived experience and intrinsic influence—scholars perceive domestic literature and culture as multidimensional and richly layered. Even within discernible mainstream and tributary currents, such complexity resists simplistic categorization. This

innate perspectival divide engenders cognitive dissonance, which, when textualized, crystallizes into frameworks like Yoshikawa Kojiro's four stage.

Simultaneously, one must consider the author's intended audience and purpose. Were the works of 20th-century Japanese sinologists like Yoshikawa Kojiro primarily directed at Japanese or Chinese readers? If targeting Japanese readers—many unfamiliar with Chinese cultural nuances—Yoshikawa's imperative was to provide lucid frameworks for cross-cultural comprehension. From this perspective, his periodization and definitions of Chinese literary history possess inherent validity. Conversely, if works like *History of Chinese Poetry* were also intended for Chinese readers, they could stimulate critical re-examination of entrenched narratives, fostering dialogue between author and audience. Thus, while Yoshikawa's perspectives diverge from mainstream Chinese scholarship, they offer an external lens for self-reflection on our literary and cultural traditions, enabling scholars to transcend insular paradigms and cultivate more holistic understandings. On balance, the benefits of this approach—bridging cultural divides while challenging disciplinary parochialism—outweigh its limitations.

5. Conclusion

Yoshikawa Kojiro's *History of Chinese Poetry* and Rokuro Shiha's *Loneliness in Chinese Literature* stand as twin pillars in Japanese sinology's exploration of the View Of Life in ancient Chinese literature. Their perspectives offer dual lenses through which to re-examine our own literary traditions. The two scholars' analyses of Literature in the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties deepen our understanding of the era's pervasive "Aloneness", while their complementary studies of Pre-Qin and Tang Dynasty Literature illuminate the dialectical tensions within these periods' texts—inviting readers to critically engage with the ambivalent ideologies conveyed in classical works. Thus, through reading and reflecting on the works of these two sinologists, we gain fresh perspectives to reexamine our nation's literary and cultural traditions. Engaging in dialogue with foreign sinologists fosters renewed insights and innovative reflections on our cultural heritage, transcending parochial narratives to achieve a more globally informed understanding.

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