



Italia e Giappone a confronto: cultura, psicologia, arti

A cura di
Stefano U. Baldassarri

ANGELO PONTECORBOLI EDITORE
FIRENZE

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Edoardo Gerlini

Literature as a Tool of Power at the Heian Court
in Japan and Frederick II's Court in Sicily

Foreword

“Which disciplines are useful to pursuit good politics? Which skills should be mastered by a good politician?” To these questions, different answers could be given, depending on the political views, the degree of education and the social profile of each answerer. Yet, the most obvious ones would be jurisprudence, economy, finance, management or other similar (somehow ‘technical’ or ‘practical’) skills that could give a ‘real advantage’ in the practice of administering a community, whether it be a large state or a small village. On the contrary, an answer like “poetry” would be quite unlikely. Although there is nothing bad about a politician who, during his spare time or his studies, is used to composing verses at a professional or amateur level – it may actually contribute to make him attractive to the electorate – nobody today would claim that to be a good politician or a leader one *must* know how to compose poems. If so, we should have a Ministry of Poetry next to that of Economy and Finance; likewise, poetry writing courses would be part of every law school curriculum. Today, poetry is definitely considered an “art”; as such, it is not deemed crucial to politics. This belief has become common in Europe since at least the 19th century, when Romanticism declared the independence of ‘true art’ from economic profit and practical advantages.

In Japan, the European ideal of literature and poetry has been quickly assimilated since the Meiji period (1868-1912). In previous times, however, a certain kind of poetry fulfilled a precise role among rituals and political events, as a direct application of the Confucian doctrine joining political power with culture and morals. As summarized by Yoshikawa Kōjirō, “for the leadership of those charged with political and moral responsibilities, to perfectly memorize the whole Confucian classics – namely the *Four Books and Five Classics* – was an essential requirement, as well as the ability to compose poems and prose in a fixed form. [...] The fact that poetry was the subject of one of the Classics [the *Shijing*, or *Classic of Songs*] was a proof of that. Therefore since Confucius onward, the importance attributed to poetry-writings-rites-music [Chinese: *shi-shu-li-yue*] was the demonstration of a doctrine of culture for culture’s sake, inside the Confucian teachings”¹.

True enough, the issue of the practical use of poetry has been debated for a long time in China and Japan as well. More importantly, one should not forget that, as Claudio Giunta pointed out, well into the 19th century European culture, too, regarded poetry as something “useful”². In doing so, it followed the principle of *delectare* (“to entertain”) and *prodesse* (“to be useful”) as expressed by Horace in his famous *Ars Poetica* (1st century B.C.).

In this paper I will provide some examples of encomiastic texts from Italy and Japan that are charged with political and instrumental meanings. To this purpose, I shall focus on the literary production of the early Heian court in Japan (8th-9th centuries) and the Sicilian court of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (13th century). I hope that this comparison may stimulate wider – even worldwide – insights into the dynamics of literary production at precise, and yet very significant, stages in the cultural history of both Italy and Japan.

¹ K. Yoshikawa, *Yoshikawa Kōjirō zenshū*, II, Chikuma shobō, Tokyo, 1968, p. 434.

² C. Giunta, *Versi a un destinatario*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002, pp. 514-518.

Literature and politics in Japan

The influence of continental traditions, first of all Confucianism, on Japanese thought until the 19th century has been both relevant and continuous. Especially in the first part of the Heian period (794-1185), the import of continental culture, rites, fashion and thought consequent to official diplomatic missions to the Chinese Tang dynasty's court left a lasting mark on the Japanese culture of the following centuries. During the Kōnin and Tenchō eras (810-834), corresponding to the reigns of Emperor Saga and his brother Emperor Junna, precise cultural politics followed the introduction of new modes of government. The latter were based, even more than before, on Confucian principles and Chinese-style jurisdiction, the so-called Statuary system (*ritsuryō-sei*). We can summarize the core of these thoughts in following two points: the direct correspondence between a sovereign's virtue and the natural and cosmological order in his kingdom on the one hand, and the production of highly refined literature, especially verses, as a reflection of the emperor's virtue and a necessary tool to legitimate the sovereign's power over the court and the state on the other.

In an attempt to reinforce and consolidate the sovereign's position (threatened by the centrifugal forces of powerful aristocratic families, which eventually led to political turmoil during the first decade of 9th century), Emperor Saga introduced some substantial reforms to the bureaucratic structure of the state. Among them, the reinforcement of the state Academy (*Daigakuryō*) – where young members of the court were trained to become officers within the complex state bureaucracy – proved to be particular important. Students graduating from its various curricula (mostly sons of mid-low rank bureaucrats) were expected to become loyal supporters of the emperor's plan for political reform. Basically a simplified version of the Tang court's Academy in China, the *Daigakuryō* had four curricula during the Heian period: Confucian Classics, (Chinese) History, Law, and Math. Among these, Law and Math (the more technical and apparently "useful"

from a modern point of view) received little attention, while Confucian Classics and History courses guaranteed a brilliant career in the service of the state for the few talented students who passed the final exams. It is important to underline that the History course (*Kidendō*) not only taught Chinese history but also literature, which in that period meant Chinese writings and poetry. Japanese texts, instead, were not yet considered “proper” literature. Being able to compose verses in Chinese was an essential requisite to finish the course. This kind of training in literary and poetic composition found direct application in official court rituals. *Kidendō* students and professors played a crucial role at the poetry banquets (*sechien*) that the emperor held in his royal palace.

These seasonal banquets (another feature imported from China) stood out as particularly important among the many official rites that were held on specific dates, such as New Year’s Day (i.e., the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar), the Double Nine (i.e., the ninth day of the ninth month), the *Tanabata* (the seventh day of the seventh month) and so on. Being directly related to the seasonal cycles and the administrative calendar, these banquets were charged with political and (to a certain extent) religious meanings. Far from being just a courtly pastime, they were public events in which all the top members of the state administration had the duty – and the honor – to participate³. As such, they were recorded in the official chronicles. During such gatherings the History professors and the most proficient students from the Academy were summoned to compose Chinese verses in front (and at the request) of the emperor. They did so by following the *ōsei* rules (that is, writing in response to the sovereign). The *ōsei* composition at official court banquets was part of an accurate choreography aimed at visualizing the centrality of the emperor as the heavenly ruler whose power can harmonize the re-

³ Y. Li, *Kodai kyūtei bungakuron: Nicchū bunka kōryūshi no shiten kara*, Bensei, Tokyo, 2011, p. 10.

lationship between nature and humankind. During these banquets, the emperor selected one or more topics (usually traditional formulas and quotes from continental classics and histories). The poet-officials would then compose poems in a strictly fixed form that was to be 'in harmony' (i.e., consistent) with that topic. Finally, fair copies of these poems were made and submitted to the sovereign's attention. As Gustav Heldt explains, this process, in which words were exchanged between the sovereign and his officials at court, "provided a microcosmic enactment of the work of officialdom [...] a symbolic enactment of power and authority"⁴. Symbolically speaking, to answer/reproduce the sovereign's words in fixed poetic verses meant to convey his will to the whole kingdom. "Poetic harmonization at *sechien* was represented as a means for naturalizing social hierarchies by grounding them in the universe's fundamental structures [...] through topic-based poetic composition, sovereign and minister created discursive harmonies that paralleled cosmological ones between Heaven and Earth, thereby guaranteeing both social stability and material bounty"⁵. By calling this ritual practice 'symbolic', we run the risk of missing the importance that these rites had in the eyes of the Heian people. In 9th century Japan, 'rituals' and 'symbols' were believed to have a direct and tangible effect on reality, both in the natural world and within human communities. Suffice it here to recall that Nagaoka-kyō (the brand new capital founded by emperor Kanmu in 784) was abandoned after just ten years owing to the belief in a bad omen, natural disasters and fear of the curse cast by the angry spirit of prince Sawara⁶.

⁴ G. Held, *The Pursuit of Harmony. Poetry and Power in Early Heian Japan*, Cornell University East Asia Series, Ithaca (NY), 2008, p. 55-56.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ W. McCullough, *The Heian Court, 794-1070*, in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 24.

An interesting feature of the texts that were composed at this kind of poetry banquets is the almost complete absence of explicit political contents. Understandably, no trace of political satire – inconceivable and unforgivable within such a narrow and controlled society as the Heian court – is to be found in these poems. More importantly, overt glorification and direct praise of the sovereign are very rare. What these poems mostly contain are descriptions of natural sceneries enriched with quotes from Chinese stories and anecdotes. The gap between the importance given to this kind of poetry as a sign of good government and the lack of topics related to either politics or administration can be explained with the ritual, choreographic value of the banquet itself as a visual representation of court hierarchy and power. The function of these poetry banquets was twofold. First, to visually emphasize the status, hierarchy, and distance of the court members in relation to the center of power (that is, the sovereign). Second, to reinforce the tie between the ruler on the one hand and the officials on the other. According to Takigawa Kōji, they were “official duties” and “political ceremonies”, not just meetings to promote poetry writing⁷. In other words, the intra-textual, artistic/literary value of the poems was secondary to their extra-textual political and ritual significance.

In this light, the poems composed on the occasion of seasonal banquets at Heian court should certainly be considered useful and functional to the government, even if from a symbolic point of view. As such, they cannot be relegated to the status of mere “entertainment” or pastime. Likewise, these poems elude the definition of “art for art’s sake” elaborated by European Romanticism.

⁷ K. Takigawa, “*Uda – Daigo no kadan to waka no dōkō*”, in *Kokinwakashū kenkyū shūsei*, eds. S. Masuda et al., I, Kazama, Tokyo, 2004, p. 233.

Literature and power in medieval Italy

As said above, the idea of a pragmatic use of literature was common in medieval Europe too. “The text was inserted in a fabric of contemporary problems to which it would give a valid answer: otherwise, reading it would be considered totally worthless”⁸. Until the 11th century, the cleric was technically the only “professional” able to read and write texts. “For those in power, he was the one who, because of his ability in reading and writing, could perform practical needs like epistolary correspondence and composing documents, the writing of annals or histories, or even more personal tasks, like celebrating political figures through the enduring tool of poetry”⁹.

The case of Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) is at once typical and extraordinary. Frederick’s cultural plan has been called both “intelligently hegemonic” and “instrumental” to his efforts aimed at strengthening imperial power and its legitimation in 13th century Europe¹⁰. A crucial feature of this wide cultural and political program was the establishment of the Naples *Studium*, an institution of higher education where young citizens of the reign could be trained to become judges or notaries of the imperial court. Moved by a sincere, deep interest in science and knowledge, Frederick II attracted to his court scholars and intellectuals from all over Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. Among them were the astrologer Michael Scot and the mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci. Frederick’s court was also a language laboratory where texts were translated from Arabic and Greek into Latin, from Latin into the vernacular etc. Moreover, since Dante Alighieri’s times, the imperial court in Sicily was universally acknowledged as the cradle of Italian (i.e., vernacular) literature thanks to the so-called *Scuola Siciliana* (Sicilian School). To a large

⁸ A. Varvaro, *Letterature romanze del medioevo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1985, p. 47 (my translation).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72 (my translation).

¹⁰ R. Antonelli, *Seminario romanzo*, Bulzoni, Rome, 1979, p. 86.

extent, the most prominent members of this school were judges, notaries and bureaucrats serving at Frederick's court. This would suffice to mark the big difference separating them from the professional singer-songwriters of southern France, the *troubadours*. This double role as poet-bureaucrat proper to many members of the Sicilian School and the function of the Naples *Studium* as a state academy make the poetry and the cultural politics of Frederick's court quite similar to the poet-officers who were trained at the academy during the Heian period in Japanese history¹¹.

A Japanese example

One of the most famous poet-officers in the early Heian court is probably Sugawara no Michizane (845-903), a graduate student from the *Daigakuryō* and often an author of formal poetry at the seasonal banquets described before¹². Born into a family of the low aristocracy, after devoting himself to Chinese studies and poetry Michizane managed to rise up to the second highest office at court, namely the Minister of the Right (*udaijin*). Also, his writings in Sino-Japanese, especially his poems, would stand out as a model of style for many centuries. In the 8th year of the Gangyō era (884), Michizane was summoned by emperor Kōkō (830-887) to serve as poet at the Chōyo banquet (the Double Nine, since it fell on the ninth day of the ninth month). On that occasion, he composed this official poem:
Ōsei composed this [in response to an imperial order] on the day of Double Nine, touching on the “Jade candle” topic.

¹¹ For a thorough assessment, see E. Gerlini, *Heian Court Poetry as World Literature*, Firenze University Press, Florence, 2014.

¹² For a comprehensive study on Michizane and the bureaucracy of ninth-century Japan, see R. Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1986.

Without doing and without fatigue, radiant is the reign of our sovereign. [...] / It [the Emperor's virtue] makes the rain fall regularly, and the wind blow gently. [...] / If the Man wishes so, the Heaven follows, as a bright jade candle / passes from spring into summer, until the golden wind of autumn [blows]. / The chrysanthemum knows how to provide its own service, next to the frost-covered fence. [...] / The elderlies from villages East and West receive [the emperor's virtue] and compose songs. / All the people from provinces North and South learn [from it], and make hymns. / The minister is a tool to create pottery, chanting with the greatest joy. [...]

重陽日、侍宴紫宸殿、同玉燭歌、忝製

無為無事明王代 [...]

欲令雨順又風調

[...]

人望天從明玉燭

自春涉夏到金飈

菊知供奉霜籬近

[...]

東西郡老承成頌

南北州民習作謠

臣在陶鈞歌最樂

[...] ¹³

To an occasional reader, this poem (16 verses in total) would probably appear quite obscure if its underlying theory is not explained to him or her. The so-called “theory of interaction between Heaven and humanity” (Chinese *Tian-ren-xiangguan shuo*, Japanese *tenjin sokan*

¹³ *Kanke bunsō* n. 144 in H. Kawaguchi, *Kanke bunsō/Kanke kōshū. Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, LXXII, Iwanami, Tokyo, 1966, pp. 218.

setsu) elaborated by Dong Zhongshu (c. 176-104 B.C.) mixed Yin Yang theories with Confucianism to have “Heaven, humans and society make up a dynamic balanced system”¹⁴. This poem by Michizane clearly rests on the same premises. According to this theory, the Heaven and the seasons cycle are directly influenced by the sovereign’s virtue; if the emperor is virtuous, he has to do nothing (first line of quote) to have Nature (rain and wind, second line) follow his will. If the seasons flow regularly, then also human activities – first of all, agriculture – will proceed regularly, with abundant crops and material benefits to be shared among all the people in the kingdom. On the contrary, natural disasters and a poor harvest are signs of scarce virtue in the ruling emperor.

The topic that emperor Kōkō proposed, the “jade candle”, is a direct reference to this theory. This is also explained in the oldest Chinese dictionary that has survived, the *Erya* (2nd century B.C.), and in its commentary: when the energies [*qi*] of the four seasons are harmonized, everything in the world is bright and warm, like a candle made of jade¹⁵. In the poem quoted above there is an obvious relationship between the natural order – seasons, rain and wind – described in the first half and the happiness that the inhabitants of the kingdom enjoy mentioned in lines 6 and 7 of the quote. Moreover, as Heldt duly pointed out¹⁶, poetry banquets popularized the emperor’s words and made them echo in the songs and hymns of his subjects, thus spreading his majesty’s virtue and grace throughout the kingdom. Therefore, the songs composed by “elderlies of eastern villages” and “the people from northern and southern provinces” are not just a declaration of wellbeing and gratitude toward the ruler; by responding to and harmonizing with the emperor’s words (that is, through

¹⁴ Z. Li, *Between tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the modernization of Chinese culture*, Chartridge Books, Oxford, 2014, p. 273.

¹⁵ T. Morohashi, *Daikanwa jiten*, Taishukan, Tokyo, 1986, 7706-438, p. 798.

¹⁶ G. Held, *The Pursuit of Harmony*, cit., p. 56.

their ‘obedience’), they implicitly legitimate his power and his control over the most remote lands of the kingdom. Finally, the closing image of the minister as a “tool to create earthenware pottery” is even more important; the earthenware pottery represents the people, who must be shaped through “learning” (verses 6-7), namely, the emperor’s words. This crucial goal is reached thanks to the intervention of the minister-poet (verse 8). Kawaguchi believes this “minister” to be the Professor of the court Academy, whose duty it was to train young officers to obey the sovereign by using poetry writing as a means¹⁷. The image of the chrysanthemum (verse 5) seems to confirm this interpretation, for Michizane loved this flower and often used it as his own symbol. Furthermore, the peripheral position of the frost-covered chrysanthemum, close to the fence, is in keeping with that of court professor (namely, the post that Michizane would later take): he knows how to serve his lord and fulfill his duty from the peripheral place that has been assigned to him. At the same time, he is the tool necessary to spread the emperor’s words to the people and, therefore, strengthen his legitimation – which implicitly stresses the importance of his role in the propagation of royal power.

An Italian example

Among the encomiastic writings composed at Frederick II’s court, the *dictamen* usually ascribed to Pier della Vigna – the emperor’s chief chancellor and *logotheta* (‘organizer of words’, that is, the court’s leading theorist) – is probably one of the most important. The *dictamen* is a letter-writing technique (either prose or meter) that developed in medieval Europe¹⁸. Written as an answer to a question (whether real or fictitious is not clear) on the moral virtues and qualities of Frederick II,

¹⁷ H. Kawaguchi, *Kanke bunsō/Kanke kōshū*, cit., p. 218.

¹⁸ For an exhaustive study of *dictamen* and *ars dictaminis*, see J. J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, pp. 194-268.

this composition is not just an example of flattery or lip service paid to the emperor. Coming from the imperial administration's main office and authored by the highest and most accredited theorist of the court (the *logotheta*, as said above, namely the one in charge of expressing the emperor's will in the best words possible), this text cannot but be a political statement. Its main goal is to advertise Frederick II's worth to the whole world, thus justifying his role and position as supreme ruler of the universe. Since the imperial court was – first and foremost – the supreme organ from which the law emanated, the words uttered by *Magister Petrus de Vineis* were tantamount to an official declaration, on par with a state document. Like Michizane's poetry, Pier della Vigna's collection would eventually become a fundamental model for the chancelleries of all European kingdoms¹⁹.

Moreover, it is worth stressing that this *dictamen* has much in common with the Michizane poem discussed before. For starters, they both aim at raising the ruler to an intermediate position between man and Heaven/God, thus making him superior to any other secular institutions. In sum, we are facing a clear self-legitimation of rights and power:

(4) *Hunc siquidem quippe terra, pontus adorant et ethera satis aplaudunt, utpote qui mundo verus Imperator a divino provivus culmine, pacis amicus, caritatis patronus, iuris conditor, iusticie conservator, potentie filius mundum perpetua ratione gubernat.*

(5) *Hic est, de quo Ezechielis verba proclamant: «Aquila grandis magnarum alarum, longo ductu membrorum, plena plumis et varietate». [...]*

(7) *Talis ergo presidio principis protectus mundus exultet; talem namque totus orbis vocabat in dominum; talem requirebat iustitia defensorem, qui in potentia strenuus, in strenuitate preclarus, in claritate benignus, in benignitate sapiens, in sapientia providus, in providentia foret humanus.*

¹⁹ H. M. Schaller, *L'epistolario di Pier delle Vigne*, in *Politica e cultura nell'Italia di Federico II*, ed. S. Gensini, Pacini, Pisa, 1986, p. 111.

(8) *In eo denique insita forma boni, tanquam livore carens, elementa ligat et elementata coniungit, ut convenient flammis frigora, iungantur arida liquidis, planis associantur aspera, et directis invia maritentur*²⁰.

(4) Since the earth and the sea worship him, and the skies applaud him greatly, he is the true emperor assigned to the world by Almighty God, as friend of peace, patron of charity, founder of all laws, custodian of justice, son of the power that rules the world with eternal discipline.

(5) He is the one announced by Ezekiel's words: «A big eagle with great wings and long pinions full of colorful feathers». [...]

(7) Therefore, guarded by the protection of such a king, the whole world rejoices; indeed, the whole world invoked such a man as his master and justice required such a man as defender, for he is strong in his power, magnificent in his strength, benevolent in his magnificence, wise in his benevolence, prudent in his wisdom, and human in his prudence.

(8) Finally, the notion of good that dwells in him, as he is free of all envy, ties the prime elements and joins the things they generate, so that cold can go with fire, what is dry can mix with water, the heights can match the plains, and straight and crooked become as one.

Quite obviously, this text discusses the issue of Frederick II's virtue in a supernatural/religious key. The quotation from the Book of Ezekiel (5), and the following *gradatio* (7) ends with a quote from Boethius²¹, whose aim is clearly to compare Frederick II to God. Pier della Vigna's reference to the emperor's power to harmonize opposite elements (8) proves particularly interesting. This notion stems direct-

²⁰ *Dictamen* (*Epistolario* III. 44) in *L'epistolario di Pier della Vigna*, eds. E. D'Angelo - A. Boccia et al., Rubbettino, Catanzaro, 2014, pp. 577-578 (my translation).

²¹ See *Consolatio Philosophiae*, III, poem 9 and F. Delle Donne, *Il potere e la sua legittimazione. Letteratura encomiastica in onore di Federico II di Svevia*, Nuovi Segnali, Frosinone, 2005, p.73.

ly from philosophical and theological speculations on the nature of *elementa* (the prime elements) and *elementata* (the things derived and generated by the elements); such speculations included the connection between earthly and heavenly matter²².

In many respects, Frederick II's court was an innovative intellectual milieu, where science – in the medieval sense of this word – was discussed alongside philosophy, theology and jurisprudence. In it, poetry too held prominence and was deeply influenced by the disciplines that I have just mentioned²³. The proto-scientific and philosophical discourse was a fundamental part of the process of legitimation of Frederick's authority. Pier della Vigna's *dictamen* perfectly summarizes this official strategy. The revival of Roman jurisprudence and civil law (upholding Justinian like a role model) was specifically aimed at providing the ruler with a new aura of sacredness²⁴. Many texts issued by Frederick II's chancellery (such as letters and edicts) present the emperor as the origin of law and order on Earth. He is described as *lex animata in terris* (living law on Earth); the emperor "is free from the law not in that he can act against justice, but because he, being the secular delegate of Almighty God, is himself the source of law on Earth"²⁵. The ruler is thus seen as personifying both justice and divine will; he is the defender of the law. Through his privileged relationship with God, he is the mediator between Heaven and Earth.

²² P. Morpurgo, *L'idea di natura nell'Italia normanno-sveva*, CLUEB, Bologna 1993, p.43.

²³ On the relationship between poetry and mathematics at that time and, more specifically, in Frederick's court, see W. Pötters, *Nascita del sonetto – metrica e matematica al tempo di Federico II*, Longo, Ravenna 1998.

²⁴ See Delle Donne, *Il potere e la sua legittimazione*, cit., p. 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

Similarities and differences between Italy and Japan

Obviously, the main difference between the two historical contexts that I have focused on lies in the theoretical premises supporting Christianity and Confucianism. In addition, one should never forget the peculiar, privileged feature of all Japanese emperors: the indisputable claim to a direct lineage connecting them with the deities of Shintoism. In Christian Europe, the evangelical tradition itself prevented any king or emperor from making similar claims. The reason was quite simple: Jesus Christ had left no descendants. The emperor was indeed *chosen* by God, but he was not a god himself. Consequently, even the most successful attempts at obtaining religious legitimation by a political apparatus (namely the *Holy Roman Empire*) were always subject to the veto of the Church. It was the latter, as is well known, that controlled religious power in most of Europe. The religious legitimation and the authority claimed by the Holy Roman Emperor could be easily revoked through excommunication. That is why the imperial propaganda promoted by Frederick's court – including the *dictamen* by Pier della Vigna – relied so much on Biblical quotations and religious hymns. The ultimate goal was to identify the figure of the emperor with that of Christ, thus freeing him from papal control. In Japan, the lack of a unifying center of religious power comparable to Rome in Christian Europe may have helped the imperial household to maintain its religious and ceremonial role even in periods when the emperors were stripped of any political authority – at least from the end of the 12th century onward.

What I find worth emphasizing is that, despite the deep differences in social and theoretical background discussed above, these two writings by Michizane and Piero obviously share a number of significant characteristics. First of all, both texts are written in an elaborated and highly formalized style. As such, they employ the language that the culture of their times held in the highest esteem: Classical Chinese and Latin, respectively. Second, although one is a poem and the other a prose text, they both belong to the same literary genre, that is, epideictic literature. More specifically, they pertain to that category of

“encomiastic compositions” whose aim is “the glorification of a particular individual in *hyperbolic* and sometimes *paradoxically* positive terms”, as Delle Donne puts it²⁶. Furthermore, the two authors deploy all their knowledge of classical models to demonstrate the virtue and the natural supremacy of their ruler. They thus enrich their texts with quotes and allusions.

Originating in a public/official context – the seasonal poetry banquet at court for Michizane, the imperial chancellor for Pier della Vigna – these writings cannot be dismissed as trivial products of political propaganda. Quite the contrary, they fulfill such fundamental duties as declaring one’s allegiance, legitimizing power, and offering ideological support to a world order based on religious/philosophical beliefs and thoughts. Their rationale does not lie in satisfying a purely esthetic desire. As even modern readers can notice and appreciate, both texts reach this goal by means of their authors’ refined literary skills. Rather, the main reason behind these compositions was indeed a practical one, which happened to be effective despite – or because of – its symbolic significance: to contrast the opposite and centrifugal forces that, both in Italy and in Japan, constantly posited an ideological threat to imperial authority. By connecting theories on the interaction between Heaven and Humanity in Japan and identifying the emperor with divine (that is, religious) power in Italy, these texts attest to and uphold the ruler’s virtue. Behold! The weather and the seasons harmoniously follow the emperor’s will: this is proof that our ruler is virtuous! That is how Piero openly rebuts any serious, ‘practical’ question on the qualities and the virtues of Frederick II. Far from being a mere hyperbole, this statement is a well-constructed explanation devised by the best *dictator* of the Holy Roman Empire. Michizane’s poem, in its own turn, is a direct answer to the question underlying the banquet’s topic proposed by Kōkō, that is, the “jade candle” symbolizing the harmony between imperial virtue and the seasonal (cosmic) order.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10 (my translation).

I have already noted how the different modes – verse vs. prose – in which these two texts were written do not prevent their belonging to the same literary genre, namely encomiastic literature. Yet, one could also find a deeper, underlying consistency behind such differences. In the case of Japan, the *ōsei* poem was a direct response to the emperor – the topic that he indicated during the banquet – *performed* during one of the most important official events. Such ceremonies were created not only to display the sovereign's greatness but also to reiterate the hierarchy between the members of the court and the inner order that should reflect the outer order of nature/world. After the banquets, the emperor dispensed presents to the participants. In so doing, he mixed the symbolic expression of superiority as owner and ruler of nature with practical benefits for those who were closer and most loyal to him. These chosen few were invited to receive gifts of various sorts and partake of the ruler's economic power. As discussed above, these occasional poems (later transcribed on paper and offered to the sovereign) symbolized the act of bureaucratic administration, which under the state system of the *Ritsuryō* code was based on the exchange of written documents between the sovereign and his ministers²⁷.

In Italy, the *dictamen* form was maybe more functional to the diffusion of a precise political message than a public event taking place at a specific site, as in the case of the Japanese poetry banquets mentioned above. A reason for this was that the spatial dimension of medieval Europe happened to be much wider and more complex than the strongly centralized political world of the Heian court. The latter was almost totally concentrated within the walls of the imperial palace at Heian-kyō, the capital of Japan. Since Frederick II's court often moved – the emperor spent only a few years of his whole life in Palermo, the formal capital of the empire – ceremonies and ritual performances would prove less effective as political tools than perfectly constructed texts meant to be copied, read and disseminated all over the empire.

²⁷ See Heldt, *The Pursuit of Harmony*, cit., p. 55.

A last feature to be stressed is the high quality – in terms of technique and intertextuality – of these two writings. As pointed out above, both Michizane's poems and Pier della Vigna's letters eventually became fundamental references for all writers in Classical Chinese and Latin for centuries to come. Obviously, it is not accidental or due to mere aesthetical reasons that the 'answers' presented by these two *magistri* were composed with such a high level of refinement. Indeed, the very quality and the elegance of the text carried a symbolic meaning. To have the most talented poets and *literati* composing a refined text in praise of the sovereign implicitly identified the emperor's court as the model (the paragon of virtue, as it were) for any other human activity. In sum, these writings presented the court as the utmost example of quality, technique, and skill. The subsequent display of symbolic power led to the legitimation of these political regimes.

Conclusions

Interestingly enough, Delle Donne's comment on epideictic literature at Frederick II's court can apply perfectly to the same kind of literary production promoted by the Heian rulers, despite the distance in time and space between these two contexts. According to Delle Donne, encomiastic texts produced in praise of Emperor Frederick "serve a much deeper function than a merely formal one, as some may believe. In fact, they constitute a part of that vast apparatus necessary to express the image of supremacy, both political and cultural; an image that all temporal rulers must create in order to attain public approval and, consequently, receive legitimation. In other words, such texts are 'symbols of power' just like those tangible and visible items (crowns, scepters, coins, and liturgies) that do not need words to be understood, for they resort to the universal language of symbols, that is, the *collatio formarum visibilium ad invisibilium demonstrationem* [a combination of visible things meant to demonstrate those that are invisible]"²⁸.

²⁸ Delle Donne, *Il potere e la sua legittimazione*, cit., p. 26.

From a modern perspective, the 'symbolic' expression of power may seem secondary to the 'real' expression and deployment of power – namely military, economic, and legislative actions. However, until modern times such symbols of power and their display were a matter of utmost importance to all political administrations. As Suzuki Hideo explains, Japanese poetry banquets and the writings that they originated served as “a kind of cooperative ritual aimed at harmonizing the various forms of power inside court society”²⁹. Since no king can rule a kingdom in chaos, the word 'harmony' carries particular weight. First of all, harmony is a quality intrinsic to politics, even in the original sense of 'government of the *polis*'. This is made clear in the last part of Plato's dialogue *Statesman*, where the Eleatic Stranger explains his idea of politics:

This then we declare to be the completion of the web of political action, which is created by a direct intertexture of the brave and temperate natures, whenever the royal science has drawn the two minds into communion with one another by unanimity and friendship, and having perfected the noblest and best of all the webs which political life admits, and enfolding therein all other inhabitants of cities, whether slaves or freemen, binds them in one fabric and governs and presides over them, and, in so far as to be happy is vouchsafed to a city, in no particular fails to secure their happiness³⁰.

The making of a “fabric [...] enfolding therein all other inhabitants of cities” is a clear image of social harmony. This does not necessarily correspond to “democracy” nor does it mean that all the citizens enjoy the same rights, for slavery was common at the time and was far from being condemned by the majority. Moreover, since Plato regards enlightened monarchy as the best possible form of government, the

²⁹ H. Suzuki, *Saga bungakuken*, «*Bungaku gogaku*», 68 (1973), pp. 1-12 (my translation).

³⁰ *The Dialogues of Plato translated into English with Analyses and Introductions by B. Jowett*, IV, Oxford University Press, London, 1892, p. 518.

distance from Heian rule in Japan becomes thinner. In this respect, it is worth noting that the image of “fabric” in political discourse is present in Confucian Asia too. A case in point is the expression *jing guo* (Japanese *keikoku*). Although usually translated as “governing the country”, it consists of the two characters meaning “weave” and “state”³¹.

As the statements by Suzuki and Delle Donne quoted above show, there are a number of relevant similarities regarding how the Heian court and Frederick II’s court looked at poetry and the political benefits that one could draw from it. These texts on which I have focused in this essay were not mere flattery. On the contrary, they fulfilled a symbolic role that the word ‘propaganda’ cannot fully convey. They were part of that legitimation process in which the ruler was constantly involved, for other subjects (whether they be inside or outside the royal family, inside or outside the court) always threatened his primacy, both in Italy/Europe and in Japan. By associating his own person with the cosmic and heavenly forces that regulate the seasons and nature, the emperor aimed to stress the importance of his own existence and the superior position allotted to him. To achieve this acknowledgment he had to rely on the best talents of his times, whose task it was to elaborate and express this ideal in an appropriate manner. Moreover, the composition of refined literature (regardless of its specific content) was testimony – in and of itself – to the emperor’s virtue as well as his cultural and political supremacy. In this regard, Pier della Vigna’s praise of Frederick II rests more on the perfectly balanced form of his writing than in its content. *What* he wrote about the emperor is indeed important. However, *how* he wrote it matters even more. In the case of Japan, the ritual performance of poems at specially designated banquets was a display of power in and of itself,

³¹ I draw this from Heldt, *The Pursuit of Harmony*, cit., where he translates the phrase *monjō keikoku* as “writing binding the realm” rather than simply “writing governing the realm”.

independently of what the poems 'said'. The use of fixed continental forms of verse and the ritual exchange of words between the ruler and the poet/court official was a sign of universal order and legitimacy for the whole establishment. By highlighting such remarkable similarities between these two historical contexts (Italy and Japan), the study of encomiastic texts from pre-modern courts can offer new insights into those forms of government and political legitimation. Finally, studies of this nature can contribute to the development of further, even more interdisciplinary investigations.