

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

“REITERATIONS OF THE PAST”

# HIDDEN POETS OF THE PAST

EARLY MODERN  
CANONIZATIONS OF  
HEIAN *KANSHI* AND  
*WAKA*

IVO SMITS

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

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広人文学

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East Zone, D-107

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## **“Hidden Poets of the Past”: Early Modern Canonizations of Heian *Kanshi* and *Waka***

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### *Abstract:*

It is a strange but hardly discussed fact that in Japan there was until the seventeenth century no articulated sense of the long history of arguably its oldest tradition of written poetry, Sino-Japanese verse (*kanshi*). The absence throughout the classical and medieval periods of a narrative throughout history, or even a canon, of Japanese *kanshi* stands in stark contrast to the rich and also long history of canonization and theoretization of poetry in Japanese (*waka*). As if to compensate for this curious omission, scholars of the Edo period (1600-1868) quite suddenly compiled a mass of anthologies and dissertations that collectively crafted for the first time a canon of Japanese *kanshi*.

This paper will explore the dynamics of the different Edo period canonization processes, especially of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In particular, it will explore the strategies of Confucian agendas of Edo scholar-poet-compilers and their intriguing predilection for *kanshi* of the Heian court period (ca. 800-1200). On the face of it, the Heian court in many ways constituted an elite, non-samurai world from a dimly remembered past that offered few staring points for identification. However, just as more accessible commentaries to *waka* collections, *The Tale of Genji* and other Japanese-language classics forced a re-orientation towards what we now consider the classics of Japanese literature, so, too, predominantly Confucian scholars, often of samurai background, created for the first time in Japan's history coherent stories of how Japan had its unique voice in a poetic form that united the whole of East Asia.