

Towards Understanding Options and Rules for Singing Chinese Verse in Early Japan

Elizabeth Markham
University of Arkansas, USA

By the eleventh century in Japan, a term *rōei* (“voiced performance of verse”) had attached to a particular courtly vocal repertory built on verse-fragments written in Chinese, and Buddhist *kada* hymns in Chinese verse-forms appear marked-up with dots of apparent tonal significance. Stabilisation of rules and procedures of an original improvisatory practice seem to have led to reliance on (writable) schematic musical form(s) (Hopkins 1986; Widdess 2013) for carrying Chinese verse—on a principle stretching from formulaic intonation to standard text-setting template (Picken 1966, 1969) combined with modal tune-model (Markham 2008, 2013). Contracted and re-stretched, melodic gestures decomposed and rebuilt, one such combinatory form came to accommodate various verse-forms of varying line-lengths, Chinese and Japanese, sacred and secular, and for various modes of vocal rendition.

This paper offers support for these observations by: (i) collating evidence for the singer’s formulaic working with a tune-model from realisations frozen in large bodies of neumations for temple *kada*, extant from the thirteenth century, with (ii) a contemporaneous synoptic musical analysis and condensed graphical representation of the grammatical procedure for the *kada*-hymns, based on oral transmission, invoking conventions and terminology of segmental tone and poetic form, and recorded in a Buddhist performance-orientated treatise.