



LANGUES ET CIVILISATIONS
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Sociétés et Humanités
Université Paris Cité

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From Paper to Stone and Back Again: Literary Monuments and Stelae in Japanese Public Space

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In many public spaces of contemporary Japan—such as streets, parks, and temples—it is not uncommon to come across stone inscriptions commemorating a historical event that took place at that location. Quite famous are the memorial stelae marking the visits of Emperor Meiji to specific sites, the so-called *seiseki*. In some cases, these monumental inscriptions feature literary or poetic texts, such as haiku by Matsuo Bashō or tanka poems from the eighth-century anthology *Man'yōshū*. The stelae inscribed with poems from the *Man'yōshū* are particularly interesting because they have become destinations for visits and itineraries, especially among Japanese visitors.

Although the custom of inscribing stones with literary texts has a long history in China and other parts of East Asia, in Japan there are relatively few examples of stelae predating the end of the early modern period. The practice of carving poems into stone monuments, especially from the second half of the twentieth century onward, may be seen as an attempt to reuse and re-evaluate classical literature, enriching these texts with new contexts and new readers. This represents a perfect example of what is called “textual heritage,” namely the cultural practice of recreating textual sources to meet the needs of people in the present.

By observing the processes of creation, preservation, musealization, and reproduction that these “textual” monuments have undergone over the centuries, it is possible to grasp certain aspects of the relationship between the historical identity of the Japanese people and the public and social spaces of Japan, both ancient and contemporary.



Edoardo Gerlini is Associate Professor of Classical Japanese Language and Literature in the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. His research interests include Heian-period (794–1185) literature, in particular Japanese and Chinese poetry from a comparative perspective. He is also engaged in interdisciplinary inquiries into processes of heritage-making related to literary texts and sources. He is the author of *The Heian Court Poetry as World Literature: From the Point of View of Early Italian Poetry* (Firenze University Press, 2014), the editor of the first volume of *Antologia di poesia giapponese* (Anthology of Japanese Poetry) (Marsilio, 2021), and co-editor with Kimiko Kono of *Koten wa isan ka? Nihon bungaku ni okeru tekusuto isan no riyō to saishōzō* (Are Classics a Heritage? Uses and Re-creations of Textual Heritage in Japanese Literature) (Bensei, 2021) and *Kingendai Nihon o ikiru tekusuto isan – mono, eii, sekai* (Living Textual Heritage in Modern and Contemporary Japan – Things, Practices, Worlds) (Bensei, 2025).