

Introduction

Japanese cultural history is rather unique because it includes writings by women from the Heian Era (794-1185 C.E.) among its earliest works of important literature. During this era, Japan saw the creative assimilation of Chinese influences and the flowering of a distinctly native literature and culture. This native literature, to which women made the major contribution, became Japan's classical tradition.

Women in the Pre-Heian Era

The comparatively high cultural achievements of Heian women are perhaps a lingering trace of an ancient, pre-Heian gender balance. In the pre-Heian era, women took charge of the spiritual realm as shamans, and men the physical realm as warrior kings. It is notable that unlike many other cultures where the sun is personified by a male god such as Apollo, in Japanese mythology the sun is a female goddess, Amaterasu, who exhibits both feminine and masculine characteristics. Also notably, a 3rd-century Chinese dynastic history records how a female shaman wins the struggle for power in Japan and reigns as queen over several communities. There are several reigning empresses in Japanese history until the 8th century.

By the Heian era, women had lost their ancient powers. The introduction of Chinese bureaucracy was accompanied by a patriarchal orientation that barred women from most political offices except for a very few around the emperor. Still, women's social position remained high. They were highly educated, had the right to inherit property, and often continued to reside with their parents, along with their children, even after marriage.

Literature in the Heian Era

The greatest work produced at this time was *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, lady-in-waiting to Empress Akiko. Considered the world's first novel, the *Genji* is written as an absorbing portrait of Heian court life, the splendor of its rituals, and aesthetic culture.

Genji is praised for the complex relationships between and among the characters. This is especially true regarding the portrayal of personal desire and the constraints that rank and gender in a highly hierarchical society place upon it as well as the hidden tensions inherent in the conduct of *Genji*'s highly calibrated social and personal relationships. The novel is striking also for the compelling evocation of its characters' minds, particularly of women of various ranks mulling upon their lot in life. In certain instances, these women exhibit an understanding of the workings of the psyche in terms almost modern.

Heian women also wrote Japan's (and perhaps Asia's) first autobiographical narratives in poem-diaries (*uta nikki*) or memoirs. In old age, the author looks back upon her life and seeks to make sense of it through the organizing framework of a story, and the unifying "I" as both the subject/narrator and object/protagonist of the story.

The best-known among these memoirs is the *Kagerô Diary* (covering the years 954-74 C.E.) by the woman known as Michitsuna's Mother. It is notable for explicitly rejecting

the fictional tales circulating at court as “fabrications” and offering the record of her own marriage as a truthful account. This memoir remains the earliest realistic account of the vicissitudes of married life in the Heian period. Its unflinching portrayal of the psychological toll of being one wife among others in the so-called “one husband-several wives” system of polygamy in the period has no parallel among the surviving diaries.

Notable also is this author’s frankly critical portrayal of her husband, Fujiwara Kaneie, a descendent of the main branch of the Fujiwara. Kaneie later ascended to the highest rank in the court bureaucracy and fathered empresses and regents. Moreover, *Kagerô Diary*’s unprecedented description of female thoughts and life would later influence Murasaki Shikibu’s similar engagement with the female mind in the *Genji*.

Another famous Heian woman author is Sei Shônagon, a lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako. Murasaki Shikibu considered Sei a rival because they served competing empresses and literary salons.

Sei wrote the *Pillowbook* in the genre known as *zuihitsu*. *Zuihitsu* has been translated as “essays,” but is distinct in being a random collection of vignette-like impressions— anecdotes of people and event, descriptions of seasonal rituals and festivals, expressions of personal opinion, likes and dislikes, and taste, and critical commentary on contemporary manners and mores. The *Pillowbook* is distinct from the female diaries in not recounting the author’s life; but it is equally absorbing in the way it is informed by a highly lively, witty, and critical, but also poetic, intelligence.

Sei is sometimes considered a proto-feminist due to her competitive stance towards her male colleagues at court (she was not above exercising her wit at their expense) and her dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunity for women to rise, like men, in rank and office by their own efforts. Her writings also include exquisitely poetic evocations of scene and atmosphere that set down for the classical tradition the characteristic mood or essential beauty of each of the four seasons.

Heian Women’s Writing in the Historical Record

The products of the Heian women’s writing brush have been read through the ages as historical records. This is partly because no other texts portray the era with as much revealing and concrete detail, analytical interest, and artistic sensibility. These works constitute compelling records of their time because in them scene and event are filtered through a subjectivity whose characteristics are themselves a concrete mark of the age. Culturally, these women writers produced that unique combination of prose and poetry, narrative and lyric within the same work that came to characterize the classical Japanese style.

Why women produced the first flowering of Japanese literature is a question of language. Simply put, men were educated in Chinese books and also wrote in Chinese, a borrowed language. Women were tutored and wrote in the native Japanese language and employed a phonetic script called *kana*. This gender difference in the field of writing is by no means an exclusive one—men occasionally wrote Japanese and some women Chinese.

But it did mean that it was women who, using the vernacular, were able to explore its possibilities as an expressive medium of the heart and mind in response to life. Their style became a model for later male writers such as Bashô, whose travel journals also employ poems (*haiku* in this case) to distill the feeling of the scene or event narrated in the prose. Among modern novelists, Yasunari Kawabata's style is an excellent indication of how Heian women's language permanently formed the Japanese literary and cultural sensibility.