

JAPANESE ESSAY – Postclassical Period

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ZUIHITSU (Essay)

Part I : CLASSICAL ERA

Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.

Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

In short, Heian culture, in its stunning variety, would become an enduring civilizational legacy, inspiring artists, writers, and craftsmen over the centuries. A fundamental aspect of Japanese national identity, to the present day, can be said to tap into Heian classical roots.

Heian Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

Heian literature both mirrored and celebrated the world of the court aristocracy. Courtly sensibility and bearing were highly valued, and these would be channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression. Personal narratives, too, gained wide currency, and once established they would maintain their privileged status over the centuries. There developed a particular interest in the so-called *zuihitsu*, or essay form— writing that recounted one's opinions, reminiscences, and reflections in a seemingly random and spontaneous fashion. As with other Heian personal writing, the accomplished *zuihitsu* would achieve a fusion of 'in-the-moment' improvisatory invention and a mastery of courtly style and elegant diction. The inclusion of details regarding day-to-day events and experiences points to the interconnectedness of Heian essays, diaries, and memoirs. In a sense, these so-called 'genres' are best understood as variants of personal narratives crafted in the 'courtly style,' intended both as a mode of private expression and a literary produce to be shared and appreciated among the impressively literate courtly class. It bears nothing, however, that poetry and poetic sentiment were an integral component of these narrative forms.

The Heian *zuihitsu* genre has long been associating with a single work that epitomizes the genre— *The Pillow Book* of SeiShônagon (Makura no sôshi, ca 1010).

The Pillow Book

Paralleling *Tale of Genji*, *The Pillow Book* was highly regarded in its own day and has ever since been regarded as the unrivalled classic of its genre. We know little of its author, a contemporary of MurasakiShikibu who served Lady Teishi, the Imperial consort. But her collection of personal musings and reflections, numbering over three hundred in the standard edition, contain some of the most-cited passages in all of Japanese literature.

The *Pillow Book* begins with a classic statement regarding the seasons and how they are to be properly appreciated:

In spring, the dawn. As the light gradually increases, the rim of the hills reddens just a bit, and we see slender purplish-red clouds trailing in the sky.

In summer, the night. I need no mention the times when the moon is visible, but it is pleasant also to watch fireflies flitting to and fro in the darkness. Even the falling rain has its charm.

In autumn, the evening. When the bright setting sun has sunk very close to the mountaintops, it is moving to see crows flying toward their roosts. Still more delightful is a file of wild geese looking very tiny.

In winter, the early morning. When the frost is white, the sight of servants hastily kindling fires and carrying glowing charcoal here and there seems peculiarly appropriate to the season.
[Based on McCullough, CJP 158-59]

SeiShōnagon was no shrinking violet, and her acerbic and witty commentary on the manners of courtly contemporaries has a pungency and flamboyant confidence that time has not diminished. Although attuned to the religious practices of the day, she had no hesitation in calling attention to very down-to-earth concerns regarding the Buddhist clergy and the religious pretensions of her contemporaries. For instance, consider Episode 39 of *The Pillow Book*:

A preacher ought to be handsome. It is only when we keep our gaze fixed firmly on a good-looking monk's face that we feel the holiness of the text he expounds. If the man is ill-favored, our gaze wanders and we lose track of what he is saying. For this reason, it seems to me that listening to an ugly monk's sermon may actually lead us into sin. . .

I wonder, too, about the honesty of those who make a point of being the first to arrive wherever there is to be a sermon, informing us that sutra expositions are holy occasions and that they themselves are simply bursting with piety. [Based on CJP 165]

The largest and most distinctive category of *The Pillow Book* is its many lists of items under set topics (*monozukushi*). Shōnagon was a great list-maker, itemizing things that she found depressing, elegant, embarrassing, adorable, and awkward. These wonderfully idiosyncratic expressions of her tastes and attitudes have come to epitomize her work, and they have generated various forms of imitation over the centuries.

Under the category of 'Hateful Things,' for instance, she includes: a hair that has got caught in the stone on which one is rubbing one's ink stick; an elderly person who warms the palms of his hands over a brazier and stretches out the wrinkles; a flight of crows circling about making loud caws; people who snore and sneeze; mosquitoes; fleas; scurrying mice, and the husbands of nurse-maids. She observes that oxen should have small foreheads, that page-boys should be small with loosely hanging hair, and that palm-leaf carriages should move slowly.

The following items are listed under the category 'Things That Make One Uncomfortable':

- While conversing with a guest whom one has received, one hears people inside the house saying all sorts of indiscreet things. It is irritating to have no way of shutting them up.
- A man of whom one is fond gets frightfully drunk and keeps repeating the same thing with a sagacious air.
- The doting parents of an unattractive young child pet him, play with him, and repeat what he says, imitating his voice.

- With a knowing air, an ignoramus drops the names of historical figures in front of a learned person.
- Someone makes another person listen to a mediocre poem of his own and announces that so-and-so has praised it.
- A conspicuously neglectful son-in-law encounters his father-in-law at a public function. . .
[Based on CJP 178-79]

Everything in Shônagon's world is subject to her unflinching judgmental gaze, and her pronouncements bespeak an exacting standard of decorum and style. What we might regard as superficial and merely modish is rendered as something akin to a moral imperative— surface remade into substance. SeiShônagon's unique work did much to establish propriety, decorum, and good taste as important cultural properties. And her brilliant fusion of social satire, wit, and wisdom is reminiscent of 'stylish' writers of our own day— among others, one thinks here of Dorothy Parker, Diana Vreeland, and M.F.K. Fisher.

In conclusion, the essayistic Heian *zuihitsu* genre, as mastered by SeiShônagon, provides a compelling and convincingly authentic glimpse into the rich interiors of courtly life and the tastes and peculiarities of the aristocratic class. As with the other classical genres, the fusion here of fictive, poetic, and diary-like passages and episodes is worth noting.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990) [Abbreviated CJP]

Morris, Ivan (transl.), *The Pillow Book of SeiShônagon* (Columbia, 1991)

Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Knopf, 1964)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007)

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the similarities and differences between the classical Japanese essay form and Western examples with which you are familiar?

What are the qualities of 'selfhood' that emerge in SeiShônagon's work? What does her work say about the life styles of Heian courtiers— their tastes, attitudes, and interactions? Can it be argued that the work chiefly conveys a female perspective, which should not be attributed to the world of the male courtiers?

If Shōnagon's work can be said to constitute a handbook of courtly style and deportment, what are the chief attributes of this style? Do the qualities that Shōnagon admirers have any parallels in our own world? Are her own tastes and standards ultimately superficial and elitist?

How does this work serve to express the lyrical and poetic sensitivity that ostensibly underscores Heian literature in general?

Images



Iconic representation of Sei Shōnagon and a representative poem, included in Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century *One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets* (Hyakunin Isshu). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Depiction of Sei Shônagon and a courtier in a woodblock print attributed to Tsukioka Settei, 1760s. Source: Public domain.

PART II : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

The Heian literary legacy was much in evidence during the medieval period. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the preëminence of courtly styles and conventions gave way to more austere and introspective modes of expression, reflecting the new social and political order. The dominance of the samurai class gave rise to the production of warrior tales and legends, with the epic *Tale of the Heike* (early 13th century) ultimately rivaling the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic.

While *waka*-centered court poetry remained the dominant literary mode, new forms— in particular, linked verse— reflected the temper of the times. A Buddhist-inspired taste for meditative reflection and solemnity developed, and it would be brilliantly evoked in the uniquely lyrical and other-worldly Noh drama. Hence, Heian and medieval literature— spanning eight centuries of Japan's cultural history— constitute a unique 'yin-yang' complementarity that reflects the interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As with the other literary genres, essay writing during the medieval period owed a substantial debt to Heian precursors. In particular, SeiShōnagon's *Pillow Book* served as the model of court-based personal narrative. Despite the persistence of an aristocratic aesthetic and overall sense of style and sensibility, the pervasive influence of Buddhist belief and ritual would inspire new modes of personal reflection and reminiscence.

Two canonical works of *zuihitsu* point to these key features of the Japanese medieval essay genre: *An Account of My Hut* by Kamo no Chōmei and *Essays in Idleness* by Yoshida Kenkō.

An Account of My Hut

Among the high points of medieval literature is an explicitly Buddhistic essay, *An Account of My Hut* (*Hōjōki*, 1212), written by the Kyoto courtier poet Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216). Chōmei favored the reclusive life, which was in fact a predilection of many of his contemporaries. Inspired by the example of Chinese literary recluses and a long tradition of Buddhist religious seclusion, he set out for the hills north of the capital. As legend has it, he built himself a small hut and therein discovered a spiritual home. The affinity with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is striking.

Nothing of the hut remains, if it ever actually existed, but Chōmei's essay— *An Account of My Hut*— lives on. Its famous opening lines are equally reminiscent of *The Tale of the Heike* and the book of *Ecclesiastes*:

The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world. . . We are all like foam on the water. I know neither whence the newborn comes nor whither go the dead. For whose sake do we trouble our mind over these temporary dwellings, and why do they delight our eyes? . . . In competing for impermanence, dweller and dwelling are no different from the morning glory and the dew. [Based on Shirane, TJL 624]

Chōmei goes on to recount a series of catastrophes that befell the capital— a great fire, a whirlwind, famine, and a powerful earthquake. The destructive effects are presented in graphic detail— buildings demolished, corpses strewn about. The litany of human travail is relentless, almost liturgical in its narrative momentum. Having thus testified to the futility of human vanity and pride, Chōmei arrives at his conclusion:

Reaching the age of sixty, seemingly about to fade away like the dew, I built a new shelter for the remaining years of my life. . . The result was less than a hundredth the size of the residence of my middle age— a mere ten feet square. . . Knowing myself and knowing my world, I have no ambitions. I do not strive. I simply seek tranquility and enjoy the absence of care. . . But the essence of the Buddha's teachings is that we should cling to nothing. Loving my grass hut is wrong. Attachment to my quiet, solitary way of life, too, must interfere with my enlightenment. Why then do I go on spending precious time relating useless pleasures? [TJL 630, 633, 634]

Kamo no Chōmei's literary meditation, at once a moving Buddhist parable and an exemplary personal essay on the theme of ephemerality, conveys a tone of authenticity that would be raised as a standard of literary quality in the modern period.

Essays in Idleness

A century after Chōmei wrote of his 'downsized' life outside the capital, the essay genre would reach new heights with Yoshida Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness* (Tsurezuregusa, 1330). In effect a sequel to Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, Kenkō's essays reaffirm the code of courtly ideals while employing a reflective and at times nostalgic voice. The first episode establishes the essayist's nonchalance with a gently ironic touch:

How foolish I feel when I realize that I've spent another day in front of my inkstone, jotting down aimless thoughts as they occurred to me, all because I was bored and had nothing better to do. [McCullough, CJP 393]

Befitting a literary miscellany, these 'idle essays' vary greatly in length and subject. But Kenkō's narrator repeatedly expresses nostalgic longing for the past.

To sit alone with a book spread out before you in the lamplight is one of life's greatest pleasures. . . In all respects I am drawn to things of ages past. Nowadays, standards of taste are growing more vulgar all the time. Even in the fine furnishings crafted by our woodworkers, I am most pleased by those done in old style. And when it comes to letters, I prefer the language I find on old scraps left from long ago. . . In times of quiet thought, I realized that of all feelings the most difficult to suppress is the longing for things past. [CJP 397, 400]

As with Shōnagon's literary ephemera, some of Kenkō's episodes comment upon aspects of courtly style and fashion. Consider the following:

Court caps in recent years have become much taller than formerly. People who own the old-fashioned boxes must add an extra lid to accommodate the new caps. [Keene, *Essays in Idleness* 58]

From the 'outsider' perspective, this sort of information will appear almost comically superficial and pointless. Other episodes will strike one as bizarre in the extreme:

You should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain. [Keene 134]

Yet it is precisely the sheer variety of observations and reflections, and their seemingly random arrangement, that distinguish the Japanese *zuihitsu* genre. Matters of 'depth' and 'superficiality' were simply beside the point. Together with SeiShônagon's classical *zuihitsu*, Kenkô's essays would become a touchstone of a classical aesthetic that developed over five centuries, as well as a model of essayistic style for generations of writers. Their work is at once a brilliant evocation of the styles and manners of courtly life while reflecting an utter indifference to the 'outside world.' In other words, the insularity and introversion of the Kyoto literary elite during the medieval period sought to preserve aristocratic privilege and its cultural hegemony while underscoring the growing irrelevance of the imperial center within the larger Japanese political context.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkô* (Columbia, 1967)

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the key commonalities and contrasts in the essays Shônagon and Kenkô?

How does Kenkô seek both to preserve something of the Heian cultural legacy and reflect upon the 'reduced' stature of the imperial court in the medieval era?

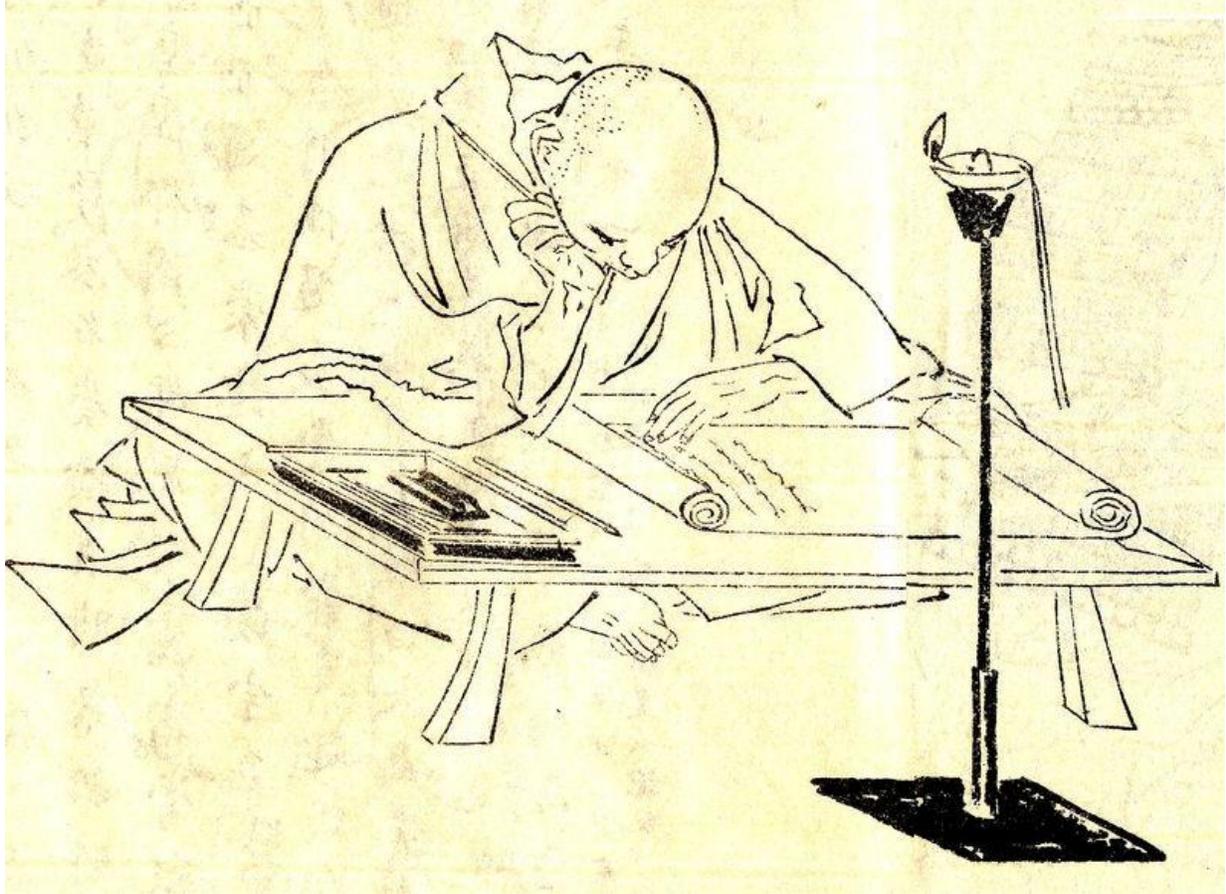
What, if anything, is revealed of Kenkô's personality and character in the course of musings? Overall, how would you assess Japan's medieval literature in terms of its presentation of convincingly 'authentic' and 'relatable' personalities?

Give thought to the qualities of mind and spirit as revealed in these classical Japanese texts. How can they be related to your own world and the ways in which you reflect upon your place in it?

Images



Model of Kamo no Chōmei's hut, erected in 2012 at the Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto, in commemoration of the 800th anniversary of Chōmei's essay. Source: John Dougill, *Green Shinto* blog.



Early 19th-century woodblock print, by Kikuchi Yōsai, of Yoshida Kenkō composing his essays by lamplight. Source: Wikimedia Commons.