

JAPANESE AUTOBIOGRAPHY—Early Modern Period

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Autobiography

Autobiographical writings were an important component of the Heian literary world. One thinks here of canonical works by women of the Kyoto court such as the Mother of Michitsuna, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu. With the medieval period, though, prevailing Buddhist values and tastes effectively silenced the strong, 'egocentric' personal voice. Autobiography— which is to say, the coherent, retrospective recounting of one's life in narrative form— had to await a new and more receptive social and cultural milieu.

As Japan's gateway to the modern world, the Tokugawa period was marked by a tension between authoritarian rule imposed by the samurai elite and a nascent concern for the individual and for the expression of one's selfhood— in terms of tangible achievements and contributions to literature and the arts. Put differently, the group mode that has typically been regarded as a defining quality of the 'Japanese national character' must somehow be reconciled with the voice of the individual seeking one's place in the world. In the West, this struggle is perhaps best represented by the romantic movement— Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his espousal of liberation from societal bonds and empowering individual expression—and by the political liberalism of John Stuart Mill. In Japan the picture has been rather more complex, in view of the persistence of authoritarian rule, hierarchical social order, and the ego-denial orientation of Confucianism and Buddhism.

Notwithstanding its extensive regulations and controls, the Tokugawa period witnessed an openness to the relatively unfettered literary expression of self. A number of writers— literary folk, political figures, and others— experimented with autobiography, which is to say the sustained, coherent narrative retrospection of the writer's life and circumstance. In earlier periods, personal narratives consisted chiefly of diary and

essay writing; there was virtually no interest in autobiography *per se*. Tokugawabunjin, too, indulged themselves in the full gamut of personal writing, not to mention poetry, and we need to recall that the various 'genres' subsumed under this broad heading are not discrete entities but rather overlap and interpenetrate. In short, the diarist, essayist, and autobiographer share a concern for plumbing one's inner self and giving it literary expression. At the same time, these texts reveal much of the authoritarian political context and the strictures imposed by formal regulations and the widely-promulgated Confucianist social order.

Our survey of Tokugawa-period autobiography will focus on two notably contrasting works that span nearly a century and a half. Their respective approaches to self-expression and to comprehending one's place in the world will reveal as much about the Tokugawa social and cultural milieu as the individuals themselves.

Arai Hakuseki, *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*

The author of this oddly-named work (in the original, *Oritakushiba no ki*, 1717) is the noted Confucianist scholar, historian, and political reformer Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725). This work has been recognized as Japan's first 'genuine' autobiography—a coherent and comprehensive account of one's life and circumstances. The following excerpts are taken from the preface and the first of three 'books' that comprise the autobiography. In line with the author's deeply-held Confucian ethics, family figures—especially his father—figure prominently, as do details of his early schooling and devotion to study and achievement.

Now that I have the leisure to do so, I have set down past events just as they occurred to me. . . I have not hesitated to write in an informal style, nor of delicate matters. . . Insofar as I alone know the full story of my life, it would be inexcusable if I failed to set them down.

I hope that those who read this account, even unto the descendents of my sons and grandsons, will not swerve from the path of loyalty and filial piety. . . An old man of sixty, I took up my pen on the 17th day of November, 1716. (Based on pp 35-36)

Having thus established the Confucian subtext for his autobiographical project, Hakuseki goes on to provide telling details regarding his father:

My father's routine was always the same. It never varied. He rose at four in the morning, bathed in cold water, and dressed his own hair. When the nights were cold, my mother wanted him to use warm water, but he would not countenance putting the servants to this trouble. . .

Both of my parents were devout Buddhists. My father never neglected to make obeisance to Buddha each morning. On the anniversaries of his parents' death, he prepared rice and placed it on the altar, without troubling the servants. While it was still dark, he would sit up and await the dawn. As soon as it was light, he would go on duty. (Based on p 40)

Hakuseki makes a point of underscoring his father's scrupulously-observed daily routine, his unfailing sense of duty, and his abstemious, self-reliant nature. These emerge as exemplary traits of character that the son would emulate and in turn model for others. Hakuseki goes on to recount his educational background and the details of a political career that met with its fair share of reversals and disappointments. The autobiography is in a sense an apologia for the conduct of one's life. Here is how the author concludes his account of his formative years:

If, at the age of seventeen, when I first became interested in Confucianism, I'd had someone to instruct me, I should not have been as I am now. . . I'd always been **poor** and had to borrow books from others. Anything I needed copied out, I had to do with my own hand, with the result that I read very few books. . . I have made such progress as I have because I've always forced myself to endure that which was most difficult to endure, and because what ordinary people do once, I've done ten times. And what they do ten times, I've done a hundred. (Based on p 60)

Channeling the Confucian precepts that he so cherished, the eminent author adopts a notably humble and self-deprecatory voice as he underscores the virtues of unstinting effort and perseverance.

In sum, Arai Hakuseki's autobiography eschews intimate disclosure and self-exposure. Rather, the author presents a controlled, measured, and deeply principled account of a life oriented around duty, self-restraint, and dedicated service.

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of KatsuKokichi

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum of autobiographical accounts by Tokugawa samurai is an 1843 work entitled *Musui's Story* (Musuidokugen) autobiography. Written by a low-ranking samurai named KatsuKokichi (1802-50), this work retells the hilarious and hair-raising exploits and misadventures of an individual who represents the very antithesis of the warrior code of honor, self-restraint, and diligence. Katsu deals unsparingly with his dissipation and vices as he regales the reader with his many escapades—brawling, thievery, and consorting with ne'er-do-wells of every stripe imaginable.

Katsu's account ends on a positive note, however, as the wayward youth eventually renounces his profligate ways and reestablishes his good name. In the epilogue to this unapologetic account of a 'failed samurai,' he holds forth on the value to be gained from the life of amoral reprobate:

Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body. Some of my friends were beaten to death; other vanished without a trace or suffered some ill fate or another. . . Only recently have I come to my senses and begun to act more like a human being. When I think of my past, my hair stands on end.

He who would call himself a man would do well not to imitate my ways. . . In everything I was misguided, and I will never know how much anguish I caused my relatives, parents, wife, and children. . .

My past conduct truly fills me with horror. Let my children, their children, and their children's children read this record carefully and savor its meaning. So be it.

Written at Uguisudani, early winter, 1843. (*Musui's Story*, pp 156-57)

Strongly contrasting with the high-minded moral agenda of Hakuseki's autobiography, KatsuKokichi's work presents the comic—and more easily relatable—persona of the picaresque anti-hero. Here one may detect a foreshadowing of the more intimate disclosure associated with modern autobiographical writing. Yet both of authors, in their distinctly different ways, seek to validate and affirm themselves via narrative self-exposure. And in so doing they bear witness to the political, social, and moral contexts in which they lived and that marked this age of samurai power and privilege.

Conclusion

As with other literary genres, Tokugawa Period autobiography can be said to mark the intersection of countervailing forces and influences—traditional and orthodox practices and precepts versus an emergent sense of self and new modes of personal expression. Writers were able to channel this personal voice through sustained narrative; shorter, more episodic accounts; and poetry. Rather than fixed, mutually-exclusive categories, these are inevitably interrelated. It is up to the reader to assess the qualities of the 'self' thus expressed and the effectiveness of the narrative vehicle for its expression.

Readings

Ackroyd, Joyce. *Told Round a Brushwood Fire: The Autobiography of Arai Hakuseki* (Princeton, 1979)

KatsuKokichi (transl. Teruko Craig). *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* (University of Arizona Press, 1988)

McCullough, Helen (ed.). *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.). *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (Columbia, 2002)

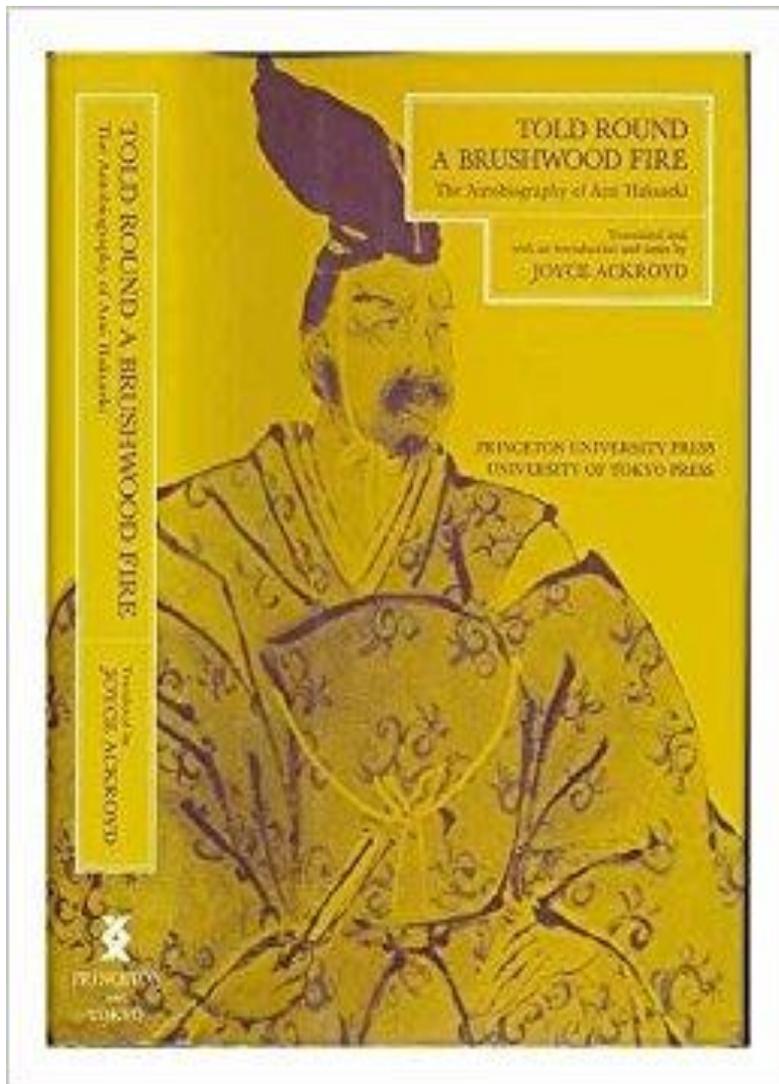
Discussion Questions and Topics

How to compare and contrast the personas that emerge in the Hakuseki and Kokichi autobiographies? What common ground can be found in these two seemingly antithetical works?

How to discern and understand the social and political contexts as presented in these two works? What aspects of Tokugawa 'life and times' are stressed here? What would you want to know more about?

Do the Hakuseki and Kokichi accounts call to mind autobiographies with which you're familiar? What connections can you make?

Images



Joyce Ackroyd translation of the Arai Hakuseki autobiography, with image of Hakuseki. (Amazon.com)

Katsu Kokichi

Musui's Story

The Autobiography of a
Tokugawa Samurai



Translated, with an Introduction and Notes,
by TERUKO CRAIG

Teruko Craig translation of the KatsuKokichi autobiography.
(Amazon.com)