JAPANESE CULTURAL HISTORY – Early Modern period

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Introduction Japanese culture was influenced extensively by Chinese and Korean civilization during the early years of its development. New ideas on technology, religion, language and more were well received by the ruling elites who were seeking normative structures for society. In particular, though Japan had its own religion known as Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism found a receptive population and was widely adopted in antiquity. Ideas on statehood, law, taxation, social structures and gender were also embraced in the years before the Nara era (710-794). In spite of this, Japanese culture retained a very strong sense of identity separate from that found on the mainland. Its position as a series of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean allowed its leadership to pick and choose what elements of culture it wanted to adopt and what elements it wished to discard. Like Great Britain, the ocean protected Japanese society from the worst forms of imperialism originating on the mainland. Because of this, Japanese society shares a number of cultural markers with China and Korea, but has its own unique heritage, culture and civilization.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Religion. Buddhism enjoyed a renaissance during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), but its role had changed from the Warring States Period (1477-1600). Before the reunification process began under Oda Nobunaga in 1560, Buddhist sects played a prominent role in the political milieu. Given that there was no central state and little in the way of law and order, abbots, priests and monks moved to protect their own interests and prerogatives. In order to do this, they contracted mercenaries and engaged warrior monks, both of which become a security threat in their own right. Nobunaga, however, made it one of his highest priorities to break the power of the church and to remove them from the governmental sphere. He is well known for engaging in acts of excessive brutality and viciousness against Buddhist institutions. Arson, wanton slaughter and vile acts such as the large scale burning at the stake of survivors, the total destruction of temple complexes and the like were all a part of Nobunaga's military campaigns. Buddhism thereafter returned to its more traditional role.

The Tokugawa later found Buddhism to be useful as a tool for social and cultural control. State sanction was returned to the faith. Every family had to register with the local Buddhist temple, which became a repository for recording births, deaths and marriages. It was a way for a non-governmental organization to maintain records which could be used by the state but which cost to the state very little. In a spiritual sense, adherence to the Buddhist faith was mandatory because priests were to interact with parishioners on a yearly basis. Nonetheless, state obligation facilitated perfunctory adherence to the faith, which minimized personal observance.

Christianity. Christianity first arrived in Japan during 16th century and was very well received. Christians of all sects, Roman Catholics and Protestants, alike appeared and began to make converts among the people and among a number of powerful *daimyō*. These western missionaries and merchants also brought innovations in metallurgy and weaponry, and were willing to sell them to the highest bidder. Oda Nobunaga was an enthusiastic adopter of western military technology. The Tokugawa, however, were very suspicious of all religions other than Buddhism and the indigenous faith, Shintō. Christianity was suspect because Christians believed all authority was derived from Christ—not a secular lord. This was made manifest in the Shimabara Rebellion in 1637 in which several *daimyō* rebelled, in part, against increasingly strict rules on religion. This was the largest conflict between the Battle of Sekigahara and the battles associated with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Christianity was then outlawed and all missionaries were expelled. Many Japanese Christians were martyred.

Kabuki. The Genroku years (between 1688 and 1704) are considered by scholars to have produced some of the greatest works of art (visual, dramatic and literary) of the age. Included among the great artists was the dramatist Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), who is often compared to Shakespeare. Kabuki theatre was the most popular of the dramatic arts in the Tokugawa period. It is distinguished (even today) by the prohibition of women on the stage, a ban that took effect in 1629. Chikamatsu is well known for bringing Kabuki to the masses. In particular, his narratives were written to appeal to the average man. Stories about the pleasure districts of Edo (Yoshiwara) or Osaka (Shinmachi) were particular favorites, as were stories of unrequited love and suicide. Kabuki can be rather bawdy, is colorful, fast moving and sometimes brash. It is always interesting and fun to watch. Chikamatsu is very well known for tragedy, for creating a setting in which duty is set against the extremes of human feelings. It is this

conflict that produces such a poignancy and intensity of feeling that Chikamatsu excelled at—and it also appealed to a very broad audience. Chikamatsu's ability to move an audience was unrivaled for his time. He occasionally ran afoul of the authorities because he had a tendency to address contemporary issues (something the authorities frowned upon) but placed them in historical settings.

Bunraku. Bunraku is best described as puppet theatre. It is believed to have originated in Osaka in the 17th century, a city in which it thrived in the Tokugawa period and still thrives today. Chikamatsu also wrote for this genre. Indeed, some of his best known works were written for Bunraku. Bunraku was surprisingly popular and allowed Chikamatsu and other dramatists greater control of the presentation of their works (in addition to the narrative). Like modern *anime*, Bunraku frees characters from the constraints of the physical human condition and allows for more stylized, fanciful elements of a narrative to find expression. Bunraku requires two or three artists/actors to manipulate the doll. It is accompanied by a chanted narrative, and various instruments such as the samisen and drums.

Censorship. A number of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's plays were censored. The most well-known example was *Love Suicides at Amijima*. However, self-censorship was practiced more often than actual censorship. Chikamatsu's political satire entitled *The Sagami Lay Monk and the Thousand Dogs* is one such example. This was a dangerous work which criticized the policies of a shōgun soon after his death. Nonetheless, the audience seemed to understand that the work was critical of an ordinance issued by the shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646-1709) that forbad the killing of any beast. When there was actual censorship, it occurred most often when a dramatist had slightly overstepped the bound of acceptable public speech or when there was a crackdown—usually associated with a change in leadership or when it appeared that society was being inappropriately influenced by a play.

Chūshingura (The Forty-Seven Rōnin) is, without question, the most famous dramatic work of the entire Tokugawa period. It found resonance with the people of Japan in the 18th century and has been rewritten, reworked and revised on numerous occasions—but its popularity has endured. It first appeared as a bunraku play in 1748 and has since found expression as a kabuki play, a movie (many times) and even a television series. It is also well known in the western world. Indeed, a movie staring Keanu Reeves on the topic was released in 2014.

Readings

Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period*, (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2006).