

Class and Social expectations from Japanese Literature

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Introduction

Class and Social ranking expectations in Japanese Literature are numerous and obvious. In Japanese literature the class ranking affects the expectations from society on an individual as part of the group. Many of the stories we read in class had the rich at the top of the class hierarchy and the poor at the bottom. Though it may have been exciting to hear about the opulence of court life or the many activities that nobility could participate in, ultimately many of the stories revolved around common folk living their daily lives. Political figures and monks were exempt from expectations as they were considered in a class of their own but this still did not spare them from appearing in folklore to teach lessons about behavior and duty.

Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* and Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* are exemplary pieces that give the reader a view into the daily lives of the Heian court. Murasaki's refined style and Sei's frankness when compared side by side provide an immersion that is not found while reading other myths or folklore. *Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* have very real characters and also inadvertently share cultural essences from that time. It is as if they are modern writers using historical texts to weave a story, even though they themselves were living through the era. These women used their time to write, write about everything. Aesthetics and philosophical values of the Heian period were very much court officials and ladies in waiting reflecting visions of themselves on each other. Seemingly isolated, they were an exclusive clique that spent all of their waking hour writing and considering all things that exist in the world. This life might have

been boring but this slow life allowed the two women to focus on the transient beauty or irregularities of life that often go unnoticed. This laid back attitude is present in each woman but Sei definitely censors herself less than Murasaki does in her writings.

In many of the shorter folklore stories from the Japanese Tales book, I noticed quite a few unique values and cultural characteristics. These short stories summarized not just values of Buddhism but also of general expectations of common people. We see what it means to be good natured or have good intentions and what happens when a person has the opposite. There are mystical rewards for good behavior but sometimes the reward is simply the knowledge of being an individual un-phased by the desires of the world who knows that they are important to the group mentality. The dynamic that all walks of life are responsible for being good people is relevant in many cultures though in Japan this loyalty to the group creates harmony that is unparalleled. This harmony is tremendously important in all cultural essences from communication or religion to creating rapid changes in the government.

Japanese Class System – Heian Era

Browsing through Tale of Genji and The Pillow Book the reader can easily see the differences in the women's personalities. Though deeper into the writing, Sei Shonagon's seem to be quite thorough and uncensored. The women portrayed in the Pillow Book are realistic and lacking in the poetic shine that the characters have in Tale of Genji. When reading literature the takeaway from the story depends on one's personal beliefs and outlook on life. Tale of Genji seems to be unreal but is still easy to relate with. Tale of Genji read in tandem with The Pillow book reveals every detail of court life. Excerpts of Pillow Book read in class include things such as "Things

That Cannot be Compared”, “Elegant Things”, and “Unsuitable Things” among other simple but revealing lists. Murasaki Shikibu’s Tale of Genji lacks in these examples but illustrates them through Prince Genji’s adventures with women throughout the land. This writing is not tedious and occasionally is quite comedic. Each woman that Genji loves reveals a new part of his personality, including his deep pain of losing his mother. The miyabi lifestyle is laidback but still important, we read that even Genji’s attendant realizes this in Yugao from the Anthology of Japanese Literature, “...his master was of a rank which brought with it great responsibilities...in view of his youth and popularity the young prince would be thought to be positively neglecting his duty if he did not indulge in a few escapades and that everyone would regard his conduct as perfectly natural and proper even when it was such as they would not have dreamed of permitting to ordinary people” (p. 106) These tasks may seem frivolous to the modern individual but this behavior was an important aspect of what was expected of a noble person.

While the women and men of the Heian court followed specific trends there were also other appearance based expectations occurring. The easiest focus is to discuss the expectations of women’s style: floor length hair, many long robes, repainted eyebrows and blackened teeth for married women. Later on we see in the story “What the seasons brought~” some pretty unique women being described. Each woman that passes is judged thoroughly by the group of rich men. We learn that preference is based on physical beauty and social standing together. One woman is beautiful only until they discover a disfigurement or inconsistency with her image, another is beautiful until she is discovered to be a widow with many babies and lastly a girl is beautiful but since she is of low class she is more or less untouchable by the rich bachelors.

Social Expectations from Literature

Folktales and novels were read by a majority of the population. High literacy rate in the Tokugawa/Edo period helped spread much information as the Shogunate mandated that villagers could not move from their respective towns to establish a new home/land holding. The only way to leave town was to go on a pilgrimage, this time of pilgrimage to Buddhist sights created an influx of literacy as it was required for effectively practicing Buddhist texts and mantras. The closing of Japan to outside influences and getting back to basics lended a hand to the Japanese to reinforce what they find to be the ideal of their society without out cultures deflecting attention or diluting the task at hand. The collectivist society created harmony that motivated each member to do their best as it was a reflection of not just the individual but the entire group consciousness. This harmony also helped streamline implementing any changes to government and other state powers. The class hierarchy in this period was organized as such: Warriors, Peasants, Artisans, Merchants. Those who created goods for consumption were higher on the hierarchy than Artisans or Merchants because they only took the goods created by the common folk for their trade, they did not contribute anything to society., Tale of Genji and other works by those enjoying the court life in Heian times are not representative of all the population. This being said they still draw on characteristics that are common in all people (including Japan) Animals also play a large part in these stories to remind people of their association with nature and that it is unbreakable. The animal appearing in folktales is a representative of the people's connection to nature. The fox is a favorite representation as it is elusive and often lived near humans. They are playful so they are not without human like weaknesses and in the folk stories they are often embroiled in human problems because of their mischievousness which makes

them very human despite their divine association. Likewise, other animals could embody human characteristics.

Learning Stories: Morals and Values

Ways of learning morals and values in Japanese literature and how these stories parallel or compare to western teaching stories are easy to see. Folktales, legends and mythology were the way people learned life lessons, morals and values in the times before the internet or the telephone. Outside of classic Heian literature written by Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon, the Japanese passed values and expectations around through folktales which served also as learning stories. There are universals in the world as far as morals which we see in stories that teach like self-control, humble actions and selflessness. Though it is not a complete parallel to other works full of moral driven stories like the Bible, we still see a great deal of similarities in common expectations for the behavior of human beings. Buddhism has a great effect on these stories, my favorite story especially “The Holy Man from Shinano” we read about a holy man making a pilgrimage and establishing a humble spot for worship. He sends a begging bowl to a rich man daily for one meal and doesn’t ask for more than that. When the rich man thinks that organizing his storehouse is more important than sending a small meal to the holy man, the rich man is punished for thinking he is the priority instead of the well being of those around him. The idea is the story gave an effective teaching to the reader and that it was appealing to as many people as possible. We often see many different walks of life interacting together in these stories: holy men, rich men and often a female as well. The Grateful Sparrow embodies this dynamic as well. It introduces many daily life tasks and occurrences such a sharing food with others, art of pickling foods to preserve them, making gourds into containers to use later for rice, the

importance of rice in the daily diet of the Japanese person, etc. I feel all of these details make the stories very real and relatable. The greedy woman in the Sparrow story is not rewarded when she breaks three bird's backs on purpose to obtain a boon, and because of her behavior the bad favor is spread to those around her as well, her will to stand out caused the entire group to suffer. The kind old woman treats her sparrow as an end not a means to an end, she does not perform her tasks with the desire to stand out, she has no desires other than to be a good person.

Conclusion

People at the top of the class hierarchy are just as affected by social expectations as the people on the bottom. In Japan the collectivistic society lends itself to being this way because it is more about the group rather than an individual as it is in the west. Heian court life was isolated and self serving however Tale of Genji more or less set the tone for expected behavior and lifestyle in the Heian period. Folktales served this purpose in a more expanded way as they reached all type of persons not just the elite. In many countries around the world we can read stories that teach honesty, integrity and humbleness, in Japan these stories take on a life of their own as they are ingrained into the culture itself through religion and class hierarchy based on what is being produced. Stories do not have "too good to be true" situations rather they have mystical occurrences that spring from nature as a force to be reckoned with not as a boon handed down from an emperor or great leader. Those who held cultural significance to society came in many forms: monk, samurai, farmer as well as nobility. Often the greatest lessons were learned from common folk interacting with animals (or nature).

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