Heian: A Time and Place

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The Japanese word "Heian" evokes an image of Japan's history and literature as they developed in this capital city from the eighth to the twelfth century. The name "Heian" means "Peace and Tranquility," words which in fact describe the political order, social stability, and rich cultural development which we now associate with Japan's Heian period. The site of Heian on the Kamo River was chosen by Emperor Kanmu (r. 781-806), who took the bold step of moving the massive imperial bureaucracy to Heian from the former capital at Nara in 794. While earlier capital city sites can be seen scattered over the plains and valleys of Japan's Kansai region, depicting the instability of political power within the imperial court before Emperor Kanmu came to power, the move to Heian would be a permanent one. Heian, now called Kyoto (which means "capital city"), would remain Japan's capital for more than a thousand years.

Like Japan's earlier capitals, Heian was built to resemble magnificent Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the Chinese capital during the Tang dynasty. During the Taika (645-650) and Nara periods (Nara period spanned 710-784), Japanese envoys (called Kentōshi) had visited Tang China and had witnessed its place at the center of Chinese political power and culture. They had returned to Japan and reproduced Changan's layout and architectural features, putting the emperor and his court at the center of Japan's political, religious, and social life.

The site of Heian was considered an excellent one for several reasons. The Kamo River joins the Yodo River which flows into the Inland Sea, permitting good access from the main island of Honshu to the southwestern islands of Shikoku and Kyūshū. The move to Heian also facilitated intercourse with China and Korea, although Japan's cultural borrowings from East Asia were largely completed during the Nara period. Missions to China would cease after 838, largely due to the deteriorating and ever more dangerous political situation on the Asian mainland. By hindsight it now seems clear that Heian Japan, therefore, was now free to begin a long and leisurely process of adapting Chinese and Korean technologies, political institutions and philosophies, and religious beliefs and customs to accommodate Japan's very different circumstances. Japanese literature, for example, would develop along paths which were quintessentially Japanese.

The city was flanked by mountains to the north and east. It was constructed as a grid of intersecting streets with the major wide avenues separated by several smaller streets. The imperial palace and government buildings, situated in the northern part of the city

and facing south, were approached by a wide avenue. This grid work plan came from the Chinese example, but the Japanese penchant for a closeness to nature and, in particular, for the beauty of the hills surrounding the capital soon led to the creation of temples and villas on the northern edges of the main part of the city itself. Most of the great monuments of Kyoto's long and distinguished culture remain there today, rather than in the middle sections of the city, which have often been destroyed by fire and warfare over the centuries.

The court society was a literate society and much of what we know about this Heian Japan rests on the great literature and art of the period, some of which still exists and can read in translation today. A topic that was of particular interest to the elitist court society of the time concerned places in and around the capital that had special meaning. Place names and associations are almost always found in the poetry and diaries of courtiers who wrote for one another. *The Tale of Genji*, an eleventh-century work of fiction by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, is replete with the names and descriptions of places where her stories unfolded and which were associated with earlier events, positive and negative connotations, and symbolic meanings.

Indeed, Heian Japan, as described in Genji and elsewhere, represented a most unusual example of a sophisticated environment redolent of, say, the court life of seventeenth or eighteenth century Europe, and of a level of sophistication otherwise unknown in the world, except in China. Women above a certain status, at least, were well educated and felt themselves the equal of the men of their society, at whom they were not afraid to poke fun in their writings.

The continuing influence and prestige of Chinese culture helped form attitudes and interests in the arts, and in the composition of poetry in particular, which remained the most prestigious form of literary expression during the Heian period. Men, trained to keep documents in classical Chinese, also wrote poetry in that language, in somewhat the same fashion as medieval monks wrote verse in Latin, but the tradition of poetry written directly in Japanese, notably in the 31-syllable form of the waka (sometimes referred to as tanka) became the dominant form that constituted the traditions of court poetry. Waka were written in earlier periods, but the first major collection of these brief and evocative poems were collected together in the highly influential *Kokinshū* (A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern) which served as the basis for the long tradition of court poetry. The chief editor for this collection was the gifted court poet Ki no Tsurayuki, many of whose works are included in the anthology. Later students of poetry memorized as a matter of course the roughly thousand or so poems that make up this collection, and these poems are still read and appreciated today, although even young Japanese readers now require some glosses for what have become obscure words and phrases.

Much of the poetry written and preserved in the Heian period was closely related to nature, and to sights and scenes in and near the capital. For government officials and other well-educated people, Heian was the center of their world; nor did they know any other, since travel to the mainland of Asia was no longer easily possible. (Japanese travelers were only able to encounter Europe for the first time in the late 16th century.) For these men and women, to be forced to live in the provinces, perhaps as minor government officials, was to abandon any chance at worldly or artistic success.

Many poems in the *Kokinshū* picture familiar scenes in and around Kyoto. Here for example, is a 31-syllable poem by Tsurayuki himself:

The state of human

hearts I cannot know and yet

the blossoms of this

familiar village still greet

me with the scent of years past.

Kokinshū #42, translated by Rodd and Henkenius

The "familiar village" mentioned in the poem is Hatsuse, the location of Hase-dera, a beautiful Buddhist temple to the south of the city, a favorite religious pilgrimage site which plays an important role in *The Tale of Genji*. It is here that, while on a visit, Ukon, a lady-in-waiting in Prince Genji's household, finds through startling circumstances Tamakazura, the long lost daughter of Genji's closest friend, Tō no Chūjō. Genji, incidentally, contains many hundreds of poems by the author, woven into this narrative of a great prince and his political and amorous career.

Since its composition, Genji has remained for most readers both in Japan and, since its translation into English by Arthur Waley in the prewar years of the twentieth century, for readers around the world, the most complex and profound evocation of life in the Heian period. Most of the long narrative takes place in the capital and covers three generations of nobility. The figures pictured there are fictitious, but in their psychological portraiture and their ability to explicate their own shifting emotional states, the inhabitants of this enormous narrative seem strikingly modern; indeed, Murasaki's writing has sometimes been compared to the work of the modern French master Marcel Proust in his masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past* (*Á la recherche du temps perdu*). As with Proust's Paris and its suburbs, Kyoto and the surrounding countryside form the specific backdrop before which the lives and loves of these appealing characters are played out.

Genji is by no means the only work of literature that provides a glimpse into the outer, and inner, life of the capital. Another popular work, also available in an excellent English translation, is the *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*), of Sei Shōnagon, a contemporary of Murasaki Shikibu and a fabled wit of her time. *The Pillow Book* is full of amusing incidents and character sketches, but it is perhaps best known and read for her famous "lists" of things which please or displease her. Some of them are very poetic indeed.

Here by way of example is a sequence from the opening section, as translated by Ivan Morris.

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!

In autumn, the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wide geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season's moods! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

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The grounding of these literary works in the environment of Kyoto, with its shifting seasons, festivals, and religious observances, grounds them and gives them a specificity, which in turn informs us about the history of this remarkable period in Japanese history, several centuries during which, unburdened by costly wars or foreign invasions, Japan's culture was to reach a level of refinement and grace unique in the world, and, indeed, one never to be known again in her long history. Kyoto in the Heian period was truly the "golden age," which subsequent generations attempted to invoke and to which many yearned to return.

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Suggested Reading

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