# **Japan: A Closed Society**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Hasten back to your country, offer these things to the court, and spread the teachings throughout your country to increase the happiness of the people. Then the land will know peace and everyone will be content. In that way you will return thanks to Buddha and to your teacher. That is also the way to show your devotion to your country and to your family (Keene 65). This message was told to the popular religious leader Kukai who had gone to China for two years to study from 804 to 806. The knowledge he would bring back to Japan would be the start of a revolution for Japan.

In this paper, I would like to compare and analyze two of Japan’s biggest times in history, the Heian and Tokugawa periods. During these times, Japan experienced its greatest time of peace and economic growth. Although they both experienced great peace and prosperity, each period would influence very different styles of literary works. In the Heian period, poetry and diary style writing that focused on the sophistication of courtly life were popular. However in the Tokugawa period, the literary works focused more on all classes and were more for entertainment. In my paper, I will be discussing the following topics: Fujiwara and Tokugawa families, Ihara Saikaku and his style of writing and the differences in the content discussed in literary works in Heian and Tokugawa periods.

**HEIAN PERIOD**

During this period, Japan endured four hundred years of peace and political strength, which brought about popular beautiful literary works that were focused on the arts, religious practices and sophisticated court life. One of these beautiful literary works is “The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon”. It was very clear that writing beautifully was important to women. In the opening of the Pillow Book, Sei discussed how troublesome it was to take so much time to write a letter so beautifully, just to have it come back un-read, with smudges on the letter (Keene 137). According to the lecture, Sei Shonagon’s style of writing evolved into a style called zuihitsu. I believe due to very little outside influence from foreign countries, people during the Heian period, mainly women, were able to focus on various things in life such as what people wore, what was considered adorable or annoying, etc.

**Fujiwara Clan: Their rise to power**

In order to rule in the Imperial government you must have been born into the Imperial families’ bloodline. Instead of fighting or creating war to overthrow the Imperial family, the Fujiwara family cleverly found a way into the Imperial dynasty. By marrying Fujiwara daughters to emperors, they became empresses and later, their grandsons and nephews would become emperors. Due to this, the Fujiwara clan, whether they held office or not, could manipulate the reins of government (Shinoda). This was one of the most influential families in the Heian period. Michinaga Fujiwara became one of the most influential members in the Fujiwara clan, ruling for over thirty years. During this time, he would live a very rich and sophisticated court life. His mansions surpassed the Emperor’s palace in beauty and sophistication. It was this kind of rich lifestyle that influenced Shikibu Murasaki to write about court life.

**Shikibu Murasaki: The Woman Who Adored Sophistication**

According to the lecture in class, women of high social status had plenty of leisure time to spend reading, writing, flirting and gossiping, so it makes sense that Shonagon and Murasaki would focus on such petty topics. Shonagon focused on unsuitable, embarrassing, and elegant things. In contrast Murasaki also focused on similar things but her diary was based more on gossip than pure observation. She favored the elegance of a woman. She spoke many times about the honorable colors that people wore compared to the “less” honorable people. She also discussed how wearing white cords tied to their hair enhanced many of the ladies features that were serving the Queen. I believe she was fair in giving each lady complements when describing her beauties and flaws. I also believe she, just like many Japanese people value the humbleness of the person. Murasaki said, “With everyone some fault is to be found, but only those who are ever mindful to conceal it even when alone, can completely succeed.” However she then also says, “As to many ladies, the question is whether they excel most in charms of mind or person. It is hard to decide!” “Wicked, indeed to write so much of others (Keene 150)!” Although she valued humbleness sometimes she herself struggled with being humble herself.

**Japan Closes its doors: Japanizing the continent**

For centuries Japan borrowed heavily from Chinese culture, but by the 9th century had begun to separate itself from the mainland (O’Halloran 5). Among the important cultural developments of this time of internal cultural concentration were the kana script, which facilitated the writing of Japanese; the cultivation of waka poetry and other distinctive literary forms, for instance, narrative tales (monogatari) and diaries (nikki); and a characteristically Japanese painting style, [yamato-e](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/yama/hd_yama.htm). Yamato-e was used to depict native scenes or illustrate native literature, in contrast to kara-e, or Chinese-style, painting, which was used for scenery and tales of China (Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, 2015, para.3).

**Poetry: The Way to Inter-Personal Communication**

"The poetry of Japan has its roots in the human heart and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. Because human beings possess interests of so many kinds it is in poetry that they give expression to the meditations of their hearts in terms of the sights appearing before their eyes and the sounds coming to their ears” (Asia for Educators). According to our lecture, poems became a significant medium for inter-personal communication.

Poetry flourished in the Heian period. Many Aristocrats in Japanese society, would use this to communicate with potential lovers, or just for entertainment purposes. Many of the themes in Poetry were connected to nature. As you are aware, Japanese religion, Shinto was a major reason for their love of nature. This fact is apparent in the Tale of Genji. In the book “Anthology of Japanese Literature”, a poem is written for Genji in regards to a flower he had inquired about earlier. The poem reads “The flower that puzzled you was but the Yuugao, strange beyond knowing in its dress of shining dew” (Keene 109). After seeing this poem, Genji responds with the following poem, “Could I but get a closer view, no longer would they puzzle me the flowers that all too dimly in the gathering dusk I saw” (Keene 110).

Class and the art of writing poetry was an important part of life during that period. Since many were not literate during this time, it showed a glare of elegance if you were able to write so beautifully.

**TOKUGAWA PERIOD**

The Tokugawa period which is also known as the Edo period, was a time of internal peace, political stability and economic growth. This period was known for its conservative government. The imperial family continues to rule, however the shogunate actually holds power of the political government. Society is separated into four classes: warriors, farmers, artisans and the merchants. The Tokugawa shogunate in a desire to control public behavior, created pleasure quarters that catered to all types of city residents (chonin) not just upper class citizens. In these pleasure quarters, teahouses, theaters and brothels flourished (Japan, 1600-1800 A.D.par.5). Although the Tokugawa shogunate was very conservative, they allowed people to have freedom to indulge in their desires. Also in an attempt to prevent all Western influence (except for the Dutch), in 1639, lord Tokugawa put into place sakoku, which is isolation or a closure of your country. Foreigners were not permitted to enter Japan. Japanese citizens could not travel abroad. All in an attempt to protect Japan’s way of life and identity. Even though Japan closed its doors, it still traded with China, Korea and the Dutch.

**Ihara Saikaku: Popular Poet and Writer**

According to our lecture, Ihara Saikaku was famous for writing the following type of genres, erotic stories, townspeople stories and samurai stories. The stories he wrote were more popular amongst the commoners. One of his popular genres of fiction is called the *ukiyo-zoshi.* This genre of writing was realistic and concentrated on the worldly pleasures in the urban centers (Japan, 1600-1800 A.D.par.6).

One of the stories, Saikaku wrote which is one of my favorites is called “What the Seasons Brought”. This is considered one of the masterpieces of Tokugawa literature. These stories were based on actual events that took place before Saikaku wrote these stories (Keene 335). My favorite story from “What the Seasons Brought”, is “The Beauty Contest.” This was a story of young playboys hanging out and judging women on their looks. They however not only judged their looks but also judged the clothing they wore. The uniqueness in the way they judged one of the women was interesting. One woman was compared to the seasons: “Her moon-shaped eyebrows rivaled in beauty the crescent borne aloft in the Gion festival parade; her figure suggested the cherry buds, not yet blossoms of kiyomizu her lovely lips looked like the top most leaves of Takao in full autumnal glory (Keene 335). If we look at poetry and many stories written by popular artists such as Murasaki and Shonagon in the Heian period, they also had an appreciation for nature and poetry.

**Sexual Freedom: Bisexuality in Japanese culture**

Prior to Tokugawa era, same-sex relationships existed in Japan. It was believed to have been imported from China in the 6th century. Originally it emerged due to the lack of women in society. The demographics in some towns were 340,277 males to 196,103 females in 1733(Leupp 62). It was age structured and seen as helping the younger partner in his maturation and education. It also required the younger partner to assume a female-like appearance (Leupp 57). Secrecy was unnecessary as 男色 was legal in the Tokugawa period. There was no hostility towards male to male sex, it was seen as men who have different tastes or preferences. In “Male Colors”, they discuss how “Coexistence of 男色and女色 is just as natural as the alteration of the seasons or the differing tastes in food and drink: “People with a sweet-tooth rarely overdrink, while heavy drinkers dislike the sweet taste of bean-jelly” (Leupp 147).

In Saikaku’s story, “The Beauty Contest”, he has a four young male characters that are traveling in the pleasure district. They are in the pleasure district for one reason and that is to have fun, enjoy themselves. They sleep with male and female prostitutes, it does not matter to them (Keene 336). This period of time would not have existed if Western ideology and beliefs were able to have a stronghold on Japan.

**Conclusion**

Overall, Heian and Tokugawa periods are what helped define Japan and her unique ways. During both periods they remained closed off from foreign influence with very little trade from nearby countries. This idea of sakoku helped Japan find her identity. She is a nation that borrows ideas, ideologies, and religious expressions and makes it fit her own society. This class has helped me have a better appreciation for the art and sophistication of classic Japanese literature.

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