

Heian Japan: A Brief Introduction

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History

The Heian period was from 794 to 1185 CE, while the capital was in the city of Heian-kyō (modern Kyoto). A Fujiwara clan member who had organized a previous move of capital was murdered; the Fujiwaras, who were rising in power, arranged the removal of the instigators including the emperor's brother Crown Prince Sawara. Sawara was sent into exile but "died" on the way (executions were uncommon due to Buddhist influence). A number of misfortunes that followed were attributed to his vengeful ghost. Attempts to placate him (including appointing him emperor) were unsuccessful, so to avoid the ghost the capital was moved in 794. Heian-kyō means "city of peace and tranquility".

A period of intense adoption of Chinese styles in all areas of aristocratic life (land ownership...laws...bureaucracy...architecture...clothes...writing system...art...etc), was followed by a period of isolationism. In 894, all official embassies to China ceased. Traders and priests were still permitted to travel but official envoys from other countries, e.g. Korea, were not received at the Japanese court.

In the 9th – 10th centuries, the Fujiwara clan gained power by providing wives for the Emperor, and holding the positions of regent (*sesshō*) and Chancellor (*kampaku*); government affairs went through Fujiwara private administration as the official bureaucracy became largely ceremonial, and the Chinese-style land reforms and tax systems declined in effectiveness. For example, money dropped out of use and was replaced by barter.

In the 11th – 12th centuries, the Heian era was in decline. A system called Cloister Government was set up, whereby retired emperors exercised power to replace the Fujiwaras, but too many lands in the provinces were tax-exempt by now for this to be very effective. There was increasing unrest; the provincial nobility became a military class as clan feudalism effectively replaced the centralized government. In particular the Fujiwara, Taira, and Minamoto families fought for power.

In 1185 Minamoto Yoritomo won a battle to become the first shogun of Japan. His seat of power was Kamakura and the following period is called Kamakura.

Culture

When we speak of Heian culture, we refer to the aristocracy who lived almost exclusively in the capital and numbered about 5,000 individuals. They referred to themselves as the "Good People" and had no interest in lower-class Japanese let alone foreigners, or in anything outside

the capital. Admittedly, travel was dangerous – there was danger of robbers (even in the capital) and the roads that were supposed to be maintained between the capital and provinces were poor and often impassable.

The bureaucracy was modeled on the Chinese system, with a Ministry of the Left and one of the Right, staffed in the upper echelons entirely by the aristocracy. Unlike in the Chinese system, it was virtually impossible for commoners to achieve high rank based on merit. However, because the emperor was not an absolute ruler – the most powerful clan lords before there was an emperor had been absorbed into the government and formed the high council – the emperor did sometimes promote commoners who had no allegiance except to him to mid-ranking positions, in order to shift the balance of power. Bureaucrats were paid in rice-producing land, with set amounts for each position that increased substantially as one went up in rank (and one could hold several positions simultaneously). The New Year when appointments/promotions were listed was a time of great excitement.

Court ritual required the ability to perform religious dances, create extemporaneous poetry in Chinese (in Confucian thought, important for government), and write elegantly (both literary and visual style) in Chinese. The emperor had many Shinto duties, and the Fujiwaras at one point gained top power by persuading an emperor to create the new position of Chancellor (for a Fujiwara, of course), outranking all others, to take over many of the emperor's mundane tasks so he could concentrate on Shinto duties. The Palace Guard (part of the bureaucracy) had such tasks as to patrol the grounds at night, twanging a bowstring to ward off evil; they probably would have been at a loss as to what to do against human attacks.

Deep on a freezing night, I love to hear the clatter of the night watchman dragging his shoes along as he approaches, and the sound of the bow twanging and his distant voice crying his name and the hour – "Third quarter, Hour of the Ox", or "Fourth quarter, Hour of the Rat". Then comes the sound of the peg going into the time-board.¹

Women of the aristocracy had a much more restricted life. They were not supposed to be seen by males other than fathers or husbands, although women who served at court had to accept the indignity of other men having the opportunity to catch glimpses of them. They spent their time behind bamboo blinds, curtains on moveable stands, or at a minimum their fans (when forced into public in court). They travelled in ox-carts with blinds; they might go to see Shinto processions, on Buddhist retreats to local temples, or with their husband or father if he had the misfortune to be posted to the provinces as a Governor. After one lady moved to a new house (still in the capital), she wrote in her diary how "far" she was from her father's house – the commentator notes it would have been a 15 or 20 minute walk.

¹ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 232.

The Grand Counsellor [visiting his daughter the empress to whom Sei Shonagon was lady in waiting] now went so far as to take away the prudent fan with which I was shielding myself from his gaze. In my desperation, I longed to shake my side-locks forward in an attempt to cover my face...I covered there, agonizingly aware that my consternation was quite exposed to his gaze. Sure he would now rise and leave me alone! But instead he sat turning the fan over in his hands and talking a while longer, asking me who had commissioned the painting on it, while I pressed the sleeve of my Chinese jacket against my bowed face so hard that I must surely have rubbed off great patches of powder, leaving me with a humiliatingly mottled complexion.²

Life was uncertain for women; apart from the dangers of fire, earthquake, and plague that affected everyone, and the danger of childbirth that was common for all women in a society where medical practice consisted primarily of calling in a Buddhist priest to drive out the evil spirit affecting the ill person, they had to worry about marriage. Marriage customs were vague. A man would become attracted to a lady from the view of her sleeves, carefully arranged to show through an ox-cart window or under a curtain.

It irritates me more than anything to see some poorly-decked-out person, off on an excursion in a miserable carriage... There she is, no inner blinds on her carriage, and a mere sleeve of a white shift draped out. You, meanwhile, have gone to endless trouble over your inner blinds in anticipation of this event, and are there in something you dare to hope will pass muster with the others, and if you notice another carriage that's finer than your own, you despairingly wonder why you ever bothered coming – so one can only wonder how on earth this woman must be feeling, at the sight of everyone else in their finery.³

He would then write courtship poems. If the lady was interested (based on the gentleman's calligraphy, paper, and the poems themselves) she would reply with a poem and he would likewise judge her based on that.

A friend ... took me off on another day to the Chisokuin for more sightseeing. The boy was with us, and as everyone was leaving he noticed a fine lady's carriage after which he started. It

² Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 171-2.

³ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 194.

dodged off into a crowd, to avoid him perhaps, but he followed and made inquiries. The occupant, it seemed, was a lady from Yamato, and the next day he sent a poem off to her: "My thoughts have turned to you, and I wonder how long a time must pass before our next chance to meet." She sent back that she had no recollection of him, and he tried again...⁴

If the courtship progressed well, eventually the lady would receive the gentleman at night. The next morning, if he was still interested, he would send a "morning after" poem. After staying with her three nights, they would share a special meal and thus be married. She would remain living with her father at least at first and always remain strongly linked to her father's household. This is a way the Fujiwaras increased their power; they produced many women as wives for emperors. Apart from the influence the women (whether empress or lower-ranking) themselves would wield over the emperor, they would return to the Fujiwara household for childbirth (anything involving blood or death is ritually unclean in Shintoism), and the children would be raised there. If the emperor died or retired when the crown prince was young, a Fujiwara would be named regent. In addition, the Fujiwara home became a palace, so when the real palace burned – 11 times in 10 years – the emperor would come to stay with his in-laws while the palace was rebuilt.

A lady's rank had to be equivalent or better than a man's for her to be a primary wife. A man could have multiple wives and abandon them without notice. For the emperor, politics rather than love dictated who was Empress at any particular time – even if the emperor was fond of an empress, if her father died or she otherwise lost political support, he would be forced to take a different empress. Of course, he had other wives and concubines, but if he showed too much favour to any who lacked support, their life could become difficult.

In a certain reign (whose can it have been?) someone of no very great rank, among all His Majesty's Consorts and Intimates, enjoyed exceptional favor. Those others who had always assumed that pride of place was properly theirs despised her ... while the lesser Intimates were unhappier still...On the far too frequent occasions when she went to him, there might be a nasty surprise awaiting her along the crossbridges and bridgeways, one that horribly fouled the skirts of the gentlewomen who accompanied her or who came forward to receive her, or ... she might find herself locked in a passageway

⁴ The mother of Michitsuna, *Gossamer Years: The Diary of a Noblewoman of Heian Japan*, trans. Edward Seidensticker, 136.

between two doors she could not avoid, and be unable to go either forward or back.⁵

Clothing

Again, we speak only of the aristocrats. Men's clothing varied, since they were more active than women but consisted mostly of various types of jacket, usually with one or two layers of baggy pants. Formal wear included a train that they would drape over the railing when sitting on a veranda. Colours and material (e.g. brocade) were to some extent regulated as to who was permitted to wear them.

Women wore long pants (formal ones dragged on the floor by several feet) under layers of gowns, wider and more open at the front than current kimonos. A formal gown would have a shorter jacket on top and an apron-like garment as a train at the back. There were set colour combinations for the layered gowns that varied with the seasons. Choosing the right colour combinations showed a lady's style.

That day all did their utmost to adorn themselves. One [Saisho, a lady in waiting] had a little fault in the colour combination at the wrist opening. When she went before the Royal presence to fetch something, the nobles and high officials noticed it. Afterwards, Lady Saisho regretted it deeply. It was not so bad; only one colour was a little too pale.⁶

Long hair (longer than the woman's height) was essential and one reason a woman's becoming a Buddhist nun was considered so drastic was because her hair was cut short. However, women might wear long hairpieces if their own, due to age or illness, did not pass muster. They wore white face powder, reddened the mouth, blackened the teeth, and marked "eyebrows" high on the forehead with black thumbprints. A woman who did not shave her eyebrows or blacken her teeth was viewed as follows:

"Ugh!" said one of the maids. "Those eyebrows of hers! Like hairy caterpillars, aren't they. And her teeth! They look just like peeled caterpillars."⁷

⁵ Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler, 3-4

⁶ Murasaki Shikibu, "The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu", in *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, trans. Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Doi, 144

⁷ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, 204, quoting from Shinshaku Nihon Bungaku Sōsho ed., ii. 569.

People did not bathe daily despite the many hot springs. Of course, washing a lady's hair was a major procedure. Instead, "perfume" was used liberally and mixing your own scent was considered an art. Clothes were stretched over a special rack and incense burnt underneath to perfume them.

Fleas are ... infuriating things. They dance about under your clothes so vigorously that you almost expect them to raise your skirts with their leaping.⁸

Domestic Architecture

There is virtually no architecture left from this period, just a little from the previous Nara period. However, domestic architecture has been thoroughly researched and re-created for this period, largely due to interest in the Tale of Genji.

A nobleman's mansion in its basic form consisted of a rectangle on low stilts, the long sides oriented north and south. Stairs came up from the south since north was an auspicious direction. All around the outside ran a veranda with a railing. Then, one step up, was an aisle that also ran all the way around. The outer "walls" of the aisle were sturdy lattice-work. The bottom 2/3 could be removed; the top 1/3 was hinged and could be swung up and hooked to the veranda ceiling. At the short ends of the building would be permanent doors that could be bolted. Inside the aisle was another step up to the central "room". Its "walls" were bamboo blinds that could be rolled up. It would contain a curtained platform that served as bed and withdrawing area. The room might be split, with one end having solid walls as a true sanctuary. Floors were of wood; tatami mats were used only individually, to sleep on and to sit on. The large aisles and central room could be subdivided into living/sleeping areas by means of curtains on 6-foot T-shaped stands and to a lesser extent by folding screens. The screens were decorated either by the relatively new Japanese-style painting, or by Chinese-style painting. If the latter, people often got good poets (male or female) to write poems that would nicely match the painting, and pasted the poem to the screen. Heat was provided by small braziers. In cold weather, one just had to pile robes on top for sleeping; there was no warm bedding. However, robes might be quilted.

This building, for the richer nobles, would have covered walkways linking it to similar buildings; one to the north for the primary wife, and ones to east and west for relatives, secondary wives, visitors, etc. The east and west buildings would each have a walkway extending south to a small pavilion. In the centre of this inverted "U" was a garden with a small lake, perhaps an island, Streams ran through the compound and under the walkways. The whole was protected by earthen walls with several gates. Thus, the people lived with an almost seamless connection to nature, which was an important part of life.

⁸ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 29

There was little furniture – chests, tables, stands on which robes could be hung over incense to perfume them, etc. Chairs were known from China but never caught on, so life was lived largely sitting on the floor.

Food

Little is recorded about food; it does not seem to have been very tasty and the emphasis was on presentation. Monk and pilgrim fare is mentioned as being particularly poor; this would be strictly vegetarian, with rice as the main food; *mochi* rice cakes are still made. Normally the nobility would eat fish and other seafood (but not raw), and some birds (for the most wealthy), as well as plants such as radishes, seaweed, fruit, nuts, sweet potatoes, eggplants, carrots, onions, and garlic.⁹ Some foods mentioned by the Costume Museum: pomegranate, chestnut, rice cakes, abalone, salmon, jellyfish, sea bream, sea bass, octopus, pheasant, other small bird, and some kind of "candies" of Chinese origin.¹⁰ An example of a special rice cake listed by the Museum for the month of the Boar (October) has glutinous rice, soybean, azuki bean, big square bean, sesame, chestnut, seven kinds of persimmon, and sugar (according to Babel Fish translation).¹¹ A special type of rice cake was used to formalize marriage, after the 3rd consecutive night the couple spent together but I do not have the ingredients.

Sei Shonagon mentions shaved ice. Morris says liana syrup was used.

Refined and elegant things: ... Shaved ice with a sweet syrup,
served in a shiny new metal bowl.¹²

People very much enjoyed *sake*, but although tea was known it was used almost exclusively for medicinal purposes at this time.

Literature

The Heian period is noted for its art, especially poetry and literature. To some extent, the importance of poetry was derived from the imported Confucian ideals of government. In Confucian ideology, poetry reflected the feelings not only of the poet but of the people in general. In turn, the feelings of the people reflected whether they were being governed well and thus were an important indication of the state of the government.

⁹Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, 147.

¹⁰<http://www.iz2.or.jp/gyoko/gochiso.html>

¹¹<http://www.iz2.or.jp/rokushiki/10.html>

¹²Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 46.

Chinese characters for writing had been used for some time, but phonetic Japanese script was introduced which made possible a blossoming of indigenous literature. Because men, to be considered cultured, had to write in the Chinese script (and in the Chinese language too) but women were not supposed to read Chinese, the great classics of this period are primarily by women. The three most noted works are Kagerō Nikki (Gossamer Years) by "the mother of Fujiwara Michitsuna", Makura no sōshi (the Pillow Book) by Sei Shōnagon and Genji Monogatari (the Tale of Genji) by Murasaki Shikibu. The latter is considered one of, if not the, greatest masterpiece of Japanese literature and the first true novel in the world, and was famous even within a few years of its appearance.

I read a few volumes of Genji-monogatari and longed for the rest, but ... I had no way of finding them. I was all impatience and yearning, and in my mind was always praying that I might read all the books of Genji-monogatari from the very first one.

One day I visited my aunt, who ... gave me more than fifty volumes of Genji-monogatari ... How happy I was when I came home carrying these books in a bag! ... Now I could be absorbed in these stories, taking them out one by one, shutting myself in behind the kicho [curtain]. ... All day and all night, as late as I could keep my eyes open, I did nothing but look at the books, setting a lamp close beside me.¹³

There were many types of paper, and selection of the right type to correspond with the contents of a letter was an art, as was the style of calligraphy.

[A messenger proffers] a formal letter on very white paper, Michinoku or perhaps decorated paper; the ink of the brush stroke that seals it at the knot has frozen as it dried, so that it trails off in a blur at the edges... It's tightly rolled and knotted, which has made little hollows in the paper at the rolls. The ink varies from rich black to pale, the lines are closely spaced and the writing sprawls over two sides of the page.¹⁴

¹³ The daughter of Fujiwara Takasué, "The Sarashina Diary", in *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, trans. Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Doi, 1, written when she was about 12-13 years old c. 1021 CE.

¹⁴ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 236.

Religion and Superstition

The indigenous religion was, and is, Shintoism. There is no formal creed so it is somewhat nebulous, but involves worship of nature spirits (inhabiting both animate and inanimate things) and ancestors. The emperor is believed to be descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu.

Buddhism was adopted in the 6th Century, and was practiced concurrently with Shintoism; indeed, to an extent it even incorporated Shintoism in the local sects. The two main sects that arose were Tendai and Shingon, both influenced by Chinese Buddhism.

Many tales from the period relating to Buddhism and Shintoism are collected in translation in "Japanese Tales", translated by Royall Tyler.

Karma

The people subscribed to the Buddhist belief that your current life was affected by what you had done in your previous lives. After death, you would again be reborn until eventually you achieved enlightenment. Amida Buddha was very popular because he was supposed to grant a happy afterlife in "the Pure Land" while awaiting enlightenment to anyone who called his name repeatedly, "Namu Amida Butsu".

Retreats

To go on retreat to pray at a Buddhist temple was a popular pastime and could provide cover for an assignation. The journey itself, although it might be uncomfortable and perhaps even dangerous, was also considered interesting, especially by women who ordinarily had little opportunity to leave their rooms.

It's also fun to undertake a temple seclusion around the end of the second month and beginning of the third, at the time when the blossoms are at their height. Along comes a group of two or three fine-looking young men, who have the air of being heads of their respective households. Their overcloaks in the cherry-blossom or willow combinations are most attractive, and the way they've tied the furl of their gathered trousers up high above the ankle is most distinguished. They're accompanied by attendants carrying beautifully decorated lunch boxes, who set off the scene to perfection, and the young retainers are dressed in plum-pink or spring-shoot green hunting costumes, variously colored robes and skirted trousers in a printed pattern. It's delightful to witness them beating the prayer gong, with slender youths evidently of good retainer families in tow holding branches of cherry blossoms. One of them is someone you recognize, but he has no means of guessing your presence there. It's amusing to overhear another lady murmur longingly,

"Oh, I do wish there was some way to give him a sign", from the sheer frustration of watching someone pass by and go on his way without being aware of her.¹⁵

Abstinences

On inauspicious days in Shintoism, people had to abstain from all but the most necessary functions. They would shut themselves up with a note on the house gate, or if they had to go out, would wear a label so people would not talk to them. Not everyone seems to have performed this very strictly; Sei Shonagon mentions men attending religious ceremonies for social enjoyment, not for the sermon, when in abstinence.

Yin-Yang

A belief in omens, magic, and feng-shui was of Chinese origin. This was of such importance that the government included a Bureau of Divination (or Yin-Yang Bureau) that was "in charge of astrological, calendrical, and aleatory [luck] calculations, the discernment of good and evil omens, and similar activities that were supposed to help the government shape its policy by acting in accordance with the fundamental process of change and growth in the natural world."¹⁶

Directional Taboos

Associated with yin-yang beliefs were lucky and unlucky directions. These greatly affected Heian aristocratic life. There were directions such as the north-east that were always unlucky, directions that were unlucky at certain periods of a person's life, and directions that were temporarily unlucky, caused by the movement of Shinto deities. These taboos are mentioned many times in the Tale of Genji.

Defilement

Purification is an important issue in Shintoism. Blood and death cause defilement, so women were not allowed at Shinto shrines (including the palace) during childbirth or their monthly cycles, and a person who had so much as seen a dead animal had to undergo purification before they could associate with others (otherwise they would pass on the defilement).

Sickness

People believed that sickness was caused by spirits, whether demons, ghosts, or the angry spirits of living people (who might not even be aware of what they were doing). Shinto priests

¹⁵ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 124.

¹⁶ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, 124.

could cast spells against illness, but most often one would get Buddhist priests to perform exorcisms. Sei Shonagon has a typical scene in the *Pillow Book*.¹⁷

Dreams

Dreams were considered to have important meanings, and people regularly consulted dream-interpretors.

The End of the Era

An important concept was *aware*, which means something like the appreciation of the beauty of things while being aware of their transitory nature. Also Tendai Buddhist beliefs emphasized the impermanence of things. In addition, Buddhist thought was that the era of "the final days of the law" would start in 1052 CE, an era of chaos and disaster something like an apocalypse, that would not end until the arrival of Miroku, the future Buddha who would mean the achievement of enlightenment for all. Thus, a melancholy sense of things coming to an end pervades much of the literature of the time.

Timeline

794: Emperor Kammu moves the capital to Heian-kyo (Kyoto), patterned on the Chinese Tang capital.

804: The Buddhist monk Saichō (Dengyo Daishi) introduces the Tendai school of Buddhism.

806: The monk Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) introduces the Shingon (Tantric) school of Buddhism.

858: Emperor Seiwa begins the rule of the Fujiwara clan.

894: Sugawara Michizane halts the imperial embassies to China.

1050: Rise of the military class (samurai).

1068: Emperor Go-Sanjo overthrows the Fujiwara clan.

1087: Emperor Shirakawa abdicates and becomes a Buddhist monk, the first of the "cloistered emperors" (insei).

1156: Taira Kiyomori defeats the Minamoto clan and seizes power, thereby ending the "insei" era, but loses interest in the provinces.

1185: Taira is defeated (Gempei War) and Minamoto Yoritomo seizes power, becoming the first shogun of Japan, while the emperor becomes a figurehead.

1191: Rinzaï Zen Buddhism is introduced in Japan by the monk Eisai of Kamakura and becomes popular among the samurai, now the leading class in Japanese society

Timeline is partly from Wikipedia entry on Heian Japan.

¹⁷ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 251

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<http://www.reconstructinghistory.com/japanese/HeianDress.htm> (patterns for sale, annotated bibliography)

<http://web.mit.edu/jpnet/kimono/index.html> (a few pictures of clothing)

<http://www.iz2.or.jp/english/> (Costume museum)

<http://www.iz2.or.jp/> (Japanese version of Costume Museum, more complete)

<http://www.fuyuya.com/kasane/kasane-index.htm> (shows each robe & some colours)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C5%ABnihitoe> (about the Juni-hitoe)

<http://www.sengokudaimyo.com/garb/garb.html> (a history of Japanese clothing and accessories incl colours)

<http://www.wodefordhall.com/display.htm> (SCA clothing reconstruction)

<http://www.taleofgenji.org/bibliography.html> and the links page at the same site.



Cat carving in Takayama, Japan. Photo © Heather 2008

A charming cat with a white tag on her red collar walking along by the railing of the veranda beyond the blinds, trailing her long leash behind her, is also a lovely and very elegant sight.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney, 87.