

# INTRODUCTION

In the few short decades since World War II, Japan has become an economic super power, extending its domain throughout the world so that now few developed countries can ignore Japan's role in the international marketplace. But it is one thing to know about a country's business practices and its economic influence and another to understand its culture. If we are to truly understand Japan, we must know about its business practices, but we must also know its history, its people, and its arts; only then can we truly come to understand the heart and soul of this unique and fascinating culture. The study of Japanese culture offers a window to see business just as surely as the other way around.

Japan is an island nation, separated from Asia on the east by the Sea of Japan and from the Americas, on the west, by the Pacific Ocean. Unlike many other island nations, Japan did not suffer military invasions from other countries, so for almost fifteen centuries Japan has been, with the exception of the influence from China, virtually isolated from its neighbors. As a result of this isolation, Japan developed a strong sense of cultural identity based on a homogeneous people who spoke a common language and shared strong political, social, religious, and artistic traditions.

Despite this relative isolation, Japan did have sporadic periods of cultural contact with China and the West and was influenced by their ideas and technology. As Paul Varley points out in his *Japanese Culture*, "within the context of a history of abundant cultural borrowing from China in premodern times and the West in the modern age, [the Japanese] have nevertheless retained a hard core of native social, ethical, and cultural values by means of which they have almost invariably molded and adapted foreign borrowings to suit their own tastes and purposes."

Japan's long and varied literary history, from the publication of the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) in A.D. 712, to the more recent translation and publication of the works of Mishima Yukio and other contemporary writers in the 1970s, is at last becoming accessible to the West. It is the intention of

this collection of essays on Japanese aesthetics and culture to facilitate, for the Western reader, an understanding of the aesthetic, cultural, and artistic legacy which shaped and informed Japan's literary history.

A part of this legacy is the shared aesthetic and cultural values mentioned earlier; it is these values which stand at the center of the following collection of essays. While some artistic forms and aesthetic values may be shared by Japan and the West (e.g., the masked drama of the classical Greek theater and the Nō drama), it is the continuity of aesthetic and cultural values intrinsic to Japanese literature and internalized by so many great Japanese writers, which set it apart from Western tradition. This collection of seminal essays, brought together for the first time in one place, translates Japanese aesthetic and cultural values for the Western reader, and in so doing presents the essential background contexts necessary for the Western reader of Japanese literature to develop a more thorough, appreciative understanding of that literature.

But the essays in this collection go a step beyond the literature to examine related elements of Japanese culture. A discussion of the tea ceremony, an interpretation of some assumptions about *bushidō*, and several discussions of contemporary film all show that the tradition of Japanese aesthetic principles is not limited to the literature alone, but covers a wider spectrum.

Selection of the essays was made on the basis of their position in the critical canon, their intrinsic literary merit, their accessibility and readability, and their emphasis on cultural phenomena directly related to the literature. It is a collection of scholarly writings by Western writers *about* Japanese aesthetics, not a collection of essays by Japanese writers setting forth the principles of their art. These essays are not intended to break new ground or present new theory about Japanese aesthetics, but to provide an opportunity for readers to acquaint themselves with the fundamental, defining principles of Japanese aesthetics, culture, and literature. The book can supplement traditional approaches to Japanese literature and Japanese studies. For those readers already acquainted with Japanese literature and aesthetics, the essays represent painstaking scholarship from which they might deepen their previous encounters.

The selection process for a book like this is a difficult one, and the choices here are deliberate and focused. There are not, for instance, essays on art (though Yasuda's essay on haiku does make some interesting connections between haiku and painting), music, or landscape gardening. They are omitted not because they are not essential for the understanding of Japanese aesthetics and culture nor because they have not developed their own aesthetic principles,

but because the focus of this collection is literature and the literary traditions. The consideration of these arts must be left to another collection.

While each of the essays in this anthology stands on its own merit and is not necessarily related to any other essay, there are reasons for the order in which they appear in the collection. The essays are arranged in three general categories: the first four essays provide a general discussion of aesthetics, the second five more specific discussions of the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama, and the final three deal with related cultural phenomena.

Thomas Rimer's very readable essay opens the collection because it provides, in a nutshell, an introduction to both the literature and the aesthetic traditions from which it springs. His "four sets of tensions or polarities (Interior/Exterior, Poetry/Prose, Aristocratic/Popular, Fiction/Fact) . . . provide Japanese literature with its unique qualities . . . [and help] make Japanese literature particularly rich and evocative." His discussion of "Language as Form" introduces the reader to considerations of language and the *monogatari* (tale), *nikki* (diary), and Nō, Bunraku, and Kabuki (drama), literary forms which will be dealt with more specifically in later essays and are representative of the literary tradition in Japan.

The next two essays provide an *entrée* to the traditions and vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics. In his essay, "Japanese Aesthetics," noted scholar Donald Keene introduces the philosophy of the fourteenth century Shinto priest Kenkō (Urabe no Kaneyoshi). Using Kenkō's *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) as a focus, Keene identifies four central principles ("suggestion," "irregularity," "simplicity," and "perishability") which he feels have shaped Japanese tastes and defined the Japanese sense of beauty. Keene develops these four principles with examples from Japanese literature and occasional comparisons to Western aesthetic principles to provide an illuminating explanation of aesthetic concerns.

Closely linked to Keene's essay are excerpts from *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary. The selections chosen from this classic work define a number of important aesthetic principles (*mono no aware*, *miyabi*, *yūgen*, *sabi*), discuss the relationship between these principles and major literary works, and also provide basic vocabulary necessary for understanding later essays. Concluding this introductory section is Graham Parkes' "Ways of Japanese Thinking." Although his essay uses, as a backdrop, the experience of Mishima Yukio's suicide (*seppuku*) and thus has a more modern focus, Parkes provides the reader with a useful introduction to "ways of Japanese thinking" while at the same time introducing similarities and differences between Western and Japanese aesthetic traditions. Parkes also discusses, as

major sources of Japanese thinking, Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Through his presentation of *Bushidō*, Japanese food, modern film, and the tea ceremony, he provides important background information.

While the first group of essays introduced the reader to general principles and important works of fiction, poetry, and drama, the second group allows for a more in-depth study of these literary forms and a closer examination of individual literary works. Donald Keene's "Feminine Sensibility" uses examples from poetry, fiction, and autobiography-diary to demonstrate that the women writers of the Heian period had a significant influence on the literature produced during this era, as well as much of the literature which was to follow. The fact that they wrote in the vernacular Japanese, rather than the Chinese of the male court poets, helped to preserve the Japanese language in spite of the fact that Chinese was the official court language. Since women were not supposed to learn Chinese, "the literature of the supreme period of Japanese civilization was left by default to the women, who were at liberty both to write in Japanese and to express themselves in the genre of fiction." Keene's analysis of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, makes it clear that this "feminine sensibility" had a significant effect on the aesthetic principles and literature of Japan, particularly in the forms of the novel and diary.

The haiku poem (17 syllables, 3 lines of 5, 7, 5, syllables respectively) is perhaps the most familiar form of Japanese literature to Western readers. Two excerpts from Kenneth Yasuda's *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History, and Possibilities in English*, provide the reader with a solid foundation for understanding this intriguing poetic form. Yasuda makes important connections between Japanese and Western aesthetic principles as they apply to poetry and offers additional insights into the relationship between haiku and painting. Students reading haiku for the first time often dismiss it as overly simplistic and may be heard to say, "Even I could write this kind of poetry." Yasuda makes it clear, through his discussion of the concepts of the "aesthetic attitude," the "aesthetic experience," and the "haiku moment" that these "little" poems represent a complex and intricate poetic form.

Another essay on haiku by Makoto Ueda focuses on the great haiku master Matsuo Bashō. Even though, as Ueda points out, Bashō "never wrote a theory of poetry himself," his role as a master poet and teacher has had a lasting effect on the Western understanding of haiku. Ueda introduces us to Bashō's theories of the poetic spirit, *sabi*, *shiori*, reverberation, reflection, and lightness. These theories make it clear that this most Japanese of poetic forms is not just three lines of simplistic verse but is a form grounded in an aesthetic tradition still alive and flourishing in modern Japan.

The reader can move from poetry to theater with an important essay by Makoto Ueda on the art of the Nō drama. Although the theory of *yūgen* is explained in “The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics,” Ueda provides another dimension to this complex aesthetic principle by articulating the principle of “imitation” as it applies to the Nō actors’ performance. Finally, his analysis of the types of Nō singing and of Zeami’s nine categories of theatrical effects help make this fascinating theater more readily understandable to the Western reader.

The second essay on theater, “The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki” by Donald Shively, takes a different approach by providing the reader with a glimpse of the complex social environment of the Tokugawa period (1600–1867) in which kabuki originated and thrived. Beginning with a brief history of the origins of kabuki around 1603, Shively develops the relationship of kabuki to prostitution and the prostitute quarters, the growth of theaters, elements of the theater season, the life of actors in the theater, and the presentation of actors in the *ukiyo-e* paintings and woodblock prints of the period. This essay provides not only important information about kabuki, but also allows the reader to gain a more in-depth understanding of the social environment of the Tokugawa period of Japanese history.

Of the last three essays in the collection, the first two bring the reader to an awareness of cultural elements that had an effect on the literature of Japan while the last essay shows the relationship of earlier themes to modern Japan. Haga Kōshirō’s “The *Wabi* Aesthetic through the Ages,” interprets for the Western reader the aesthetic principle of *wabi*, which “together with the concept of *yūgen* (mystery and depth) as an ideal of the *nō* drama and the notion of *sabi* (lonely beauty) in *haiku* poetics . . . is one of the most characteristic expressions of Japanese aesthetic principles.” By connecting the idea of *wabi* to *chanoyu* (the tea ceremony) Kōshirō introduces the reader to a cultural phenomenon very important to the aesthetic traditions of Japan. As he refers to the works of Kenkō and Zeami, the principles of *yūgen* and *sabi*, and the ink painting of the Muromachi period (1336–1573), the reader once again is reminded of the interconnectedness of the Japanese aesthetic principles discussed in this collection.

A quite different, but equally important, cultural phenomenon is discussed by Roger Ames in his “*Bushidō*: Mode or Ethic?” Although both Parkes and Ames use the death of the writer Mishima Yukio as a backdrop for their discussions, it is Ames’ insights into the “mode” and “ethic” of this often misunderstood concept that help make it clear to the Western reader. Using Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s *Hagakure* (The Book of the Samurai) as a guide,

Ames shows how “the resolution to die” is “the center of the *bushi* mentality,” as he addresses the question of “the effect of this resolve on human action and human freedom.” The essay also shows the importance of *bushidō* in the Tokugawa period and its “support [of] a variety of causes and moralities, from extreme political factions to the militarism of imperial Japan, from the *kamikaze* pilots to the exploits of the Red Army.” Ames argues that while *bushidō* “may appear to be negative and nihilistic, there is support, however, to suggest . . . that the dividends for this discipline do include a very real degree of personal freedom and fulfillment.” To understand *bushidō* is to understand a very significant aspect of Japanese culture.

The final essay in this collection, Paul Varley’s “Culture in the Present Age,” brings us to post–World War II Japan. While most of the essays in this collection focus on earlier periods of Japanese history, Varley’s discussions of the literary work of such post war writers as Dazai Osamu, Kawabata Yasunari, and Mishima Yukio, as well as the literary movements of that age, provide insight into the changes taking place in Japanese culture. In a particularly interesting segment of this essay, Varley sees Japanese film as “one of the most important media for the transmission of Japanese culture to the West.” Discussions of modern theater, architecture, and the rise of the new religions complete the picture of culture in postwar Japan. This essay complements Parkes’ essay, which also discusses literature and film.

All of the essays in this collection stand as influential, scholarly texts in their own right, and each sheds light on an important aspect of the aesthetic, literary, and cultural traditions of Japan. Readers who immerse themselves in the literature and in the aesthetic and literary traditions are preparing themselves to better understand the complexity and subtlety of Japan. As Thomas Rimer writes, “With exposure comes curiosity. The essays [in this collection] provide not only evocative accounts of the social and intellectual conditions under which Japanese artistic works have been created, but they attempt as well to explicate in English, and in a useful and unpretentious fashion, such basic concepts as *yūgen*, *sabi*, *wabi* and a variety of others. The result is a virtual handbook of cultural values and provides a continuing repair for all those who seek greater understanding.”

# HISTORICAL PERIODS

Although there are several earlier anthropological/historical periods, this list begins with the Nara period as it is the beginning of the historical framework covered by the essays in this collection. There are some variances in the exact years and titles of these periods; those listed are the ones most commonly identified.

Nara Period 710–794

Capital moved from Asuka to northern Nara region. Buddhism becomes court religion. Three important literary works, *Kojiki* (712), *Nihon shoki* (720), and *Manyōshū* (777) published.

Heian Period 794–1185

Capital moved to Heian. Beginning of domination of Fujiwara family at court. Founding of Tendai and Shingon schools of Buddhism. Publication of *Kokinshū* (905) and *Tale of Genji* (1010). Period of great cultural and artistic flowering.

Kamakura Period 1185–1333

Destruction of Taira by Minamoto ushers in medieval period of wars and disruption. Beginning of warrior and shogun rule. Rinzai and Sōtō schools of Zen introduced from China. Publication of *Tales of the Heike* (1225).

Muromachi Period 1333–1568

Disruption and warfare continue. Beginning of fourteen generations of Ashikaga shoguns. 1467–77: period of wars; Japan breaks up into many small domains ruled by *daimyō*. 1543: Portuguese arrive; introduction of firearms. Spread of Zen culture. Nō theater and tea ceremony develop.

Momoyama Period 1568–1600

End of Ashikaga shogunate by Oda Nobunaga. 1582: Nobunaga assassinated and Toyotomi Hideyoshi unifies Japan. 1587: proscription of Catholic missionary activity.

- Tokugawa (Edo) Period 1600–1868  
 1603: Tokugawa Ieyasu establishes fourteen generations of Tokugawa shoguns. 1609: prohibition of Catholicism. 1635: ban on Japanese travel abroad; Japan essentially closed to foreign visitors. 1853: arrival of Perry.
- Genroku Era 1688–1704  
 General flowering of the arts including Kabuki and the puppet theater as well as art in form of prints from *ukiyo* (floating world). Renewed interest in poetry and narrative fiction.
- Meiji Period 1868–1912  
 1868: shogunate overthrown by samurai alliance; Emperor Mutsuhito restored to throne and capital moved to Edo (renamed Tokyo). 1896: importation of movies begins fascination with Western culture. 1904: Russo-Japanese War.
- Taishō Period 1912–1926  
 1912: Taishō emperor succeeds. Two-party civilian government until 1932. Start of radio broadcasting. Many writers visit West, influenced by Western literary movements.
- Shōwa Period 1926–  
 Ascension of Shōwa emperor Hirohito. 1941: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor; 1945: atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki end war. 1945–52: Allied occupation of Japan. Postwar literary movements abound. Rise of Japanese film. Start of televised broadcasting.



## NOTES ON LANGUAGE, PRONUNCIATION, AND NAMES

The first writing system in Japan occurred when *kanji* (Chinese characters) were introduced from China. The Japanese went on to develop their own syllabary (a set of written signs or characters of a language representing syllables) called *kana* which are phonetic symbols and represent pronunciation, of which there are two types.

*Hiragana*            *Hiragana* was developed by modifying the shape of *kanji*. It was used primarily for personal communication and poetry because it was flowing and looked pretty. It was the primary medium for court women. In modern Japanese writing there are forty-six simple *hiragana* symbols and twenty-five variations.

*Katakana*            *Katakana* was developed by taking part of the *kanji* and substituting it for the whole. It first emerged in the writing of Buddhist priests. In modern Japanese writing it is used primarily for Western words which have become part of the Japanese language and to make words stand out as we would use italics.

*Kanji*                *Kanji* are still used to write large numbers of Chinese words that have been borrowed.

Romanization      This is the form in which most foreigners read Japanese. It is simply the writing out in roman (Latin) script the Japanese language.

### Pronunciation

The pronunciation of the romanized Japanese is quite simple. There are five basic vowels pronounced as follows:

- a    father
- i    *ē* as in *tea*
- u    as in *boot*
- e    *eh* as in *feather*
- o    as in *boat*

Long vowels are indicated by the use of a macron as in *Man'yōshū*. Consonants are pronounced as in English (the *g* is always hard) and there are no silent letters.

### Japanese Names

In most cases Japanese names are given with the surname first and the personal name second (just the opposite of English). However, Japanese often refer to famous writers by their personal names, which we do not do in English. It is not uncommon to see names listed in both orders, thus Yasunari Kawabata or Kawabata Yasunari. For the researcher, this often means having to look in bibliographies under both names.