

Detecting the Self: Dis-eases and Spirituality in Contemporary Popular (Japanese) Literature

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Abstract

The Heian period (794-1185) was widely considered to be the golden age of Japanese artistic and cultural development. Major literary breakthrough could be seen in the appearance of numerous female courtly writers, and the publication of the world's first novel *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu. Literary and cultural masterpieces also documented the evolution of results of cultural exchange with China. Looking back, the Heian period was a time of rich hybridity in terms of artistic form, philosophical and cultural ideas, and governmental structures. The Tang influence from China had left an imprint in the Japanese culture, yet duly absorbed and regenerated into a uniquely Heian sensibility. The strength of Heian sensibility is such that even contemporary popular culture still makes references to its cultural icons to tell present day stories. Yumemakura Baku's popular fiction re-fashions the Heian yin-yang master Abe no Seimei (921-1005) into a Sherlock Holmes figure, and re-interprets human diseases as psychological mysteries, and successfully appeal to Asian readers as well as those in many parts of the English-speaking world. The presentation looks at stories from the large *Onmyōji* collection which Yumemakura Baku published over the last 30 years, to examine the meaning of dis-eases as depicted in the contemporary popular fiction that re-interprets practices and beliefs from more than a millennium ago.

Keywords: Heian Japan; Yumemakura Baku; Abe no Seimei; Onmyōji; psychological wellbeing

Introduction: Re-fashioning Heian Japan

The Heian period (794-1185) was widely considered to be the golden age of Japanese artistic and cultural development. Major literary breakthroughs could be seen in the emergence of numerous female courtly writers, who captured snapshots of court life, and depicted the complicated human relationships among courtiers of different ranks. The world's first novel *The Tale of Genji*, was the creative product of a court lady, Murasaki Shikibu, published in early 11th century. In the literary and artistic masterpieces, one can see the influence of Tang China, as Japanese delegations were sent to China between the 7th and the 9th century to learn various aspects of culture, including religion, as well as government organisation. Overall, these four centuries are fondly remembered as an elegant, artistic, and glamorous era of a cultural hybrid where Japanese sensibility was enriched with foreign components. The strength of Heian sensibility is such that even contemporary popular culture still makes references to its cultural icons to tell present day stories. A very strong present-day example is Yumemakura Baku's popular fiction series, *Onmyōji*, in which he re-fashions the Heian onmyōji (yin-yang master) Abe no Seimei (921-1005) into a Sherlock Holmes figure, and re-interprets human diseases as psychological mysteries.

Abe no Seimei was an official in the Heian government, his job was to advise the emperor on spiritual matters, such as choosing the most auspicious dates for important ceremonies, praying for the health of the imperial family, and conducting rituals and divination. He lived to his 80s which was rather unusual at his time, and that adds charisma to his character, making him a favourite subject for stories. Although there is not much historical record of his life, stories about his mystical powers, and supernatural feats that he performed built up over the centuries. Yumemakura Baku's rendition of Seimei into a young, attractive, and almost neutral-gendered yin-yang master began in 1986 when he published his first *Onmyōji* story, "Genjo to iu biwa oni ni toraruru koto" (A biwa called Genjo is stolen by an *oni*). This

modernised character embodies qualities that contemporary readers of the 20th and 21st centuries can easily identify with: playful yet reflective, humorous yet serious when needed, flexible but professional, and most importantly a deep respect for the suffering of humankind.

With a firm orientation in the historical Heian setting, Yumemakura rejuvenates the ancient characters by inserting a contemporary sensibility into the depiction of their adventures. Partnering with the playful Heian-Sherlock is Minamoto no Hiromasa, a nobleman and talented musician shaped into a Heian-Watson, always sincere and eager to do good, to the extent of being naïve. The historical Minamoto no Hiromasa (918-980) was descended from the powerful Fujiwara family, but removed from the line of succession and granted a commoner's surname. While the historical facts of his lineage are not the focal point of the stories, his musical talent and his status grants him the freedom needed to engage in adventures with Seimei. The partners in investigation transgress realms of beings in Yumemakura's fictional Heian world, to relieve suffering beings of their dis-eases. Through their journeys of detection, contemporary readers are reminded of the invisible but inescapable connection between the material and the spiritual existence, and how a good life can only be achieved by a good understanding of our internal self.

Displacements of the Heart and Body: Dis-eases in “The Kuchinashi Lady”

The distinctive contemporary sensibility of Yumemakura's re-creation of the Heian stories can be seen in “The Kuchinashi Lady”. The story begins with the usual visit Hiromasa pays to Seimei's house – the courtyard is untamed, and the house is so untidy and rundown that it looks uninhabited. Every time Hiromasa comes for a visit, he wonders whether Seimei is here, and inevitably some creature will appear out of nowhere to greet him. In this occasion, a small animal comes out and speaks to Hiromasa – in Seimei's voice. This forms a pattern of how the stories usually begin, showing the casualness of Seimei's character, but also the magical power he has, as he manipulates spirits and creatures to do his bidding. Hiromasa, the nobleman who

has access to information, usually brings news about mysterious events in the capital city, or problem cases handed to him by other courtiers. Most of the adventures begin with these two friends' small talk, then leading to the mysterious affair at hand.

This time Hiromasa brought the strange experience of a monk who was living and practicing at Myouanji (meaning “wonderful peace temple” literally). For seven nights he woke up in the middle of the night and discovered a beautiful lady sitting outside his bedroom. The lady was naked under a thin cloak, and she covered her mouth with her right-side sleeve, not speaking. When the monk asked what he could do for her, she lifted her very sad eyes and looked at him beseechingly, and moved her right sleeve to ... reveal that she had no mouth! On the eighth night, the monk was reading *Kokin Wakashū* (Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times) before going to bed, and the book was opened at a page by his bedside. In the middle of the night, he was awoken and discovered the same lady sitting by his bedside. This time, when he asked what he could do to help her, she pointed at the open page which contained a Waka poem about kuchinashi, and then she disappeared.

As usual, Seimei agreed to accompany Hiromasa to “have a look” at the mysterious event, although readers are given to feel that he already had a good idea of what was happening. This night the same sequence of events occurred, and the partners in investigation came face to face with the silent lady. When Seimei approached the sitting lady, he took from his pocket a small piece of paper with one Chinese word written on it: “ru”. The lady looked at Seimei with joy and gratitude when she saw the word, and she tilted her head towards the study before disappearing. The study, it turns out, was the place where the monk practiced by copying the sutras. Seimei opened the book and read the monk's writing of the *Heart Sutra* – and discovered a smutch over the word “ru”, leaving only the left part (woman) visible and the right part (mouth) missing. Seimei asked for paper and glue and restored the mouth to the woman character – thereafter the silent lady did not appear to trouble the monk again.

The kuchinashi lady is suffering because her mouth is displaced (or misplaced) by the monk's carelessness when copying the *Heart Sutra*. As she is only a word on the page, she has to take a form that can be understood by the monk – thus the beautiful woman's form, dressed in only a thin cloak. What is interesting is that this human form still cannot speak, and has to point to a poem on the page to communicate her needs. The particular poem she refers to contains the word “mouthless”, which is an obvious clue to her condition, but why is the monk reading a love poem before bedtime? Does this bedside reading material tell us anything about the emotional condition of the monk? And, does this emotional state have any connection to his carelessness while copying the *Heart Sutra*? Although the *Heart Sutra* is the shortest sutra in the canon, it contains the essence of Buddhist teaching – the “emptiness nature” of all things. The monk fails in his practice of seeing the emptiness nature of all things, and cannot fight his unconscious desires – desires to satisfy a self.

Free from the Spell: The “Real” Self in “A Biwa Called Genjo is Stolen by an *oni*”

The attachment to material objects, including the human body, is the recurrent reason for suffering in Yumemakura Baku's *Onmyoji* stories. Seimei is repeatedly asked to solve problems of noblemen who were troubled by jealousy, wounded pride, greed, anger, and the inability to let go of losses. The power and possible harm of attachment is described in the very first story of the fiction series, “genjo to iu biwa oni ni toraruru koto” (A Biwa Called Genjo is Stolen by an *oni*). Seimei was recalling his recent visit to Mount Kōya and his discussion with the monks about “spell”. He concludes that the most basic, but still powerful, spell is the name. Instead of the living being creating a name, it is actually the existence of a name giving birth to the identity of a living being. Seimei pointed at a wisteria tree and said that by naming it Mitsumushi, the tree will assume the qualities of a woman, wait for his return every day, and flower for him to please him. The name is a spell cast on the object/person, allowing manipulation.

The mysterious event Hiromasa brought to Seimei further confirms this theory. The famous biwa Genjo was stolen from the imperial palace, but for a number of nights, Hiromasa heard celestially beautiful music which could only be coming from Genjo, moreover played by a master, when he passed the main city gate. Seimei accepted his invitation to go, and the next night they brought another master musician with them, hoping to engage the mysterious biwa player through music. It turned out that Genjo was stolen by a ghost of an Indian man, Kandata, who lived more than a hundred years ago as an instrument maker. The wandering ghost chanced to see the beloved Genjo which he made in his previous life, so he took it in nostalgia. He would let it go if they brought one of the court ladies in exchange – he saw one who looked like his wife so many years ago.

Seimei expressed sympathy and agreed to his conditions of exchange. However, readers note that in their discussion, Seimei did not give out his real name to Kandata the ghost, while the others all revealed their real name. On the night of exchange, the court lady was presented, but she was carrying a weapon given to her by her brother, and this angered the ghost. He killed the woman and intended to punish Seimei and the group. The ghost called out their names one by one and said “don’t move” – Hiromasa and the monk were both frozen still in the midst of their action. But Seimei was not influenced in anyway, because without knowing his real name, the ghost had nothing to bind him with. Instead Seimei demonstrated perfectly how the name, agreed by both parties as the bond, can control by freezing Kandata, calling his name.

Finally, Seimei released the ghost of the Indian man from the decaying dog’s body he used as his habitat, and coaxed him into taking refuge in Genjo instead. When asked why Kandata complied, Seimei answered that because he used sweet words – another powerful spell. In this story which sets the beginning of a successful fiction series that appeals to contemporary readers for more than three decades, the concept of the name with its aural qualities as the most basic spell has been established. This invisible connection between the name and an object or

a person appears again and again in the adventures of Seimei and Hiromasa, signalling our continuous engagement with the meaning of our existence since ancient times. Just as the sutra-copying monk cannot be free from his desires, Kandata cannot be free from his attachment to his past, including his identity as Genjo's creator, husband to his wife, and the bond with his name. The only way one can be free (of any dis-eases) is to be free from the labels of a self.

Conclusion

Japanese popular fiction writer Yumemakura Baku has created a fiction series set in ancient Japan, with all its cultural and artistic details, but re-fashioned to connect to contemporary readers. The huge success of the series (over Japan as well as the Asian region and some English-speaking countries) is good proof that his choice of having the main characters as a quasi-Holmes-and-Watson dual, as well as the modernisation of the mysteries are well-targeted decisions. Seimei and Hiromasa are historical characters, but their involvement in the fiction series is contemporary in nature: they unravel the mysteries of noblemen in trouble, and reveal that these mysteries are but unfulfilled desires in people's heart. They present to us a world when external dis-eases, pain and suffering, are the manifestations of emotional and psychological trouble inside. This view chimes well with contemporary sensibilities, and readers find consolation as well as a sense of identification in the stories. Resolutions may not be easy to come by, but the reading experience is therapeutic as one finds the self and trouble creatively reflected.

Works Cited

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