

# On the Study of Early Modern “Elegant” Literature

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On 21 November 2014, I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to talk about my past research at the Research Center for Science Systems affiliated to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. There follows a summary of my talk.

(1) Elucidating the distinctive qualities of early-Edo 江戸 literature, with a special focus on “elegant” or “refined” (*ga* 雅) literature, such as the poetry circles of the emperor Go-Mizunoo 後水尾 and the literary activities of Hayashi Razan 林羅山.

## *The importance of the study of “elegant” literature*

· Up until around the 1970s interest in the field of early modern, or Edo-period, literature concentrated on figures such as Bashō 芭蕉, Saikaku 西鶴, and Chikamatsu 近松 of the Genroku 元禄 era (1688–1704) and Sanba 三馬, Ikku 一久, and Bakin 馬琴 of the Kasei 化政 era (1804–30), and the literature of this period tended to be considered to possess a high degree of “common” or “popular” (*zoku* 俗) appeal. This was linked to a tendency, influenced by postwar views of history and literature, to hold in high regard that aspect of early modern literature in which “commoners resisted the oppression of the feudal

system.” But when considered in light of the actual situation at the time, there can be no doubt that *ga* literature in the form of poetry written in both Japanese (*waka* 和歌) and Chinese (*kanshi* 漢詩), with its strong traditions, was a major presence in terms of both its authority and the formation of literary currents of thought. By taking into account the coexistence, conflict, and merging of *ga* and *zoku* literature, it ought to be possible for us to fully respond to the richness of early modern literature.

*Distinctive qualities of early-Edo literature*

• The Ōnin 応仁 war (1467–77) resulted in an enormous severance of cultural traditions. Thereafter cultural endeavours only barely continued through the activities of the court poetry circles of the emperor Go-Kashiwabara 後柏原, the literary circles centred on Gozan 五山 temples, and linked-verse poets (*rengashi* 連歌師), and there were few literary achievements during the Sengoku 戦国 period. But with the advent of the Edo period new cultural traditions were formed as the distinctive features of *ga-zoku* and a publishing culture came to the fore.

• A distinctive quality of literature in the early Edo period was the establishment of a circuit, as it were, characterized by the rehabilitation of the classics and the revival and strengthening of the “elegant,” the emergence of the “popular,” and the dissemination and penetration of education through publishing. During the period centred on the Kan’ei 寛永 era (1624–44), there was encouragement of scholarship and poetic composition in the poetry circles of Go-Mizunoo in the area of native Japanese literature, while in the field of Chinese learning the influence of Confucian studies undertaken by scholars of Chinese learning centred on Hayashi Razan expanded. This corresponded to the rehabilitation of the classics and the revival and strengthening of the “elegant.” Set over against the revival and strengthening of the “elegant,” there emerged the “popular.” The

breadth of culture expanded through the educational character of *kanazōshi* 仮名草子 and the tepid style of the Teimon 貞門 school of *haikai* 俳諧 and *kyōka* 狂歌, both forms of poetry. Through developments in printing technology there were added the dissemination and penetration of education through publishing, distinctive of the early modern period.

The circuit formed by these three factors was subsequently further expanded and refined and continued to exist as the basic pattern for the spread of important ideas and culture in society during this period. (Suzuki 2013b)

#### *Go-Mizunoo’s court poetry circles*

• The emperor Go-Mizunoo (and his son the emperor Reigen 靈元) engaged in much lively literary activity, in which the Nakanoin 中院 family played an important auxiliary role. (Suzuki 1996)

• For understanding the historical position of Go-Mizunoo, importance should be attached to the significance of his feelings of admiration for the emperor Go-Toba 後鳥羽 and the way in which he made reference to Go-Kashiwabara’s management of his poetry circles. In connection with the latter in particular, the fact that the poetic style of Sanjōnishi Sanetaka 三条西実隆 was regarded as a standard in early-Edo poetry circles is important. (Suzuki 1996)

#### *The life of Hayashi Razan, a scholar of Chinese learning*

• On account of Razan’s connections with Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康, there tends to be a focus on the first half of his life, including the incident concerning the inscription on the bell at the temple Hōkōji 方広寺, the publication of the Suruga 駿河 editions of Chinese works, and the partitioning of the Suruga Library. But light also needs to be shed on his forties and fifties, during the Kan’ei era and later, so as to gain a grasp of his lifetime achievements.

• Razan tends to be taken up in connection with politics and intellectual thought.

But he himself was quite fond of indulging in the spirit of elegance and refinement associated with the arts, and his literary achievements were also considerable.

• There is evident in Razan’s activities too a stance characteristic of “knowledge” in the early-Edo period, namely, bringing together large quantities of information that can be broadly subsumed under “general learning,” substantiating it with corroborative evidence, and making it accessible to large numbers of people through the culture of publishing. These activities may be valued for their comprehensive, evidence-based, and educational qualities. (Suzuki 1999, Suzuki 2012)

(2) Analysis of poetic expression, with a special focus on how the traditional fields of *waka* and *kanshi* changed in the early modern period and on comprehensively reconsidering the history of early modern poetry.

*Modes of expression in waka*

• The majority of *waka* poems by emperors and court nobles in the early modern period were composed by stringing together phrases used in earlier poems. Instead of rating such poems poorly on account of their lack of individuality, they ought to be recognized for having contrived to create novelty by skilfully combining traditional poetic phrases. The keyword here is *tsuzukegara* つづけがら . (Suzuki 1996; Suzuki 2004a; Hayashi, Hiroki and Suzuki 2007)

• When seeking to bring novelty to their *waka*, emperors and court nobles of the early modern period endeavoured to utilize phrases from Chinese poems written by Chinese, which had not been done previously. (Suzuki 1996)

*Modes of expression in kanshi*

• It is evident that when writing about historical subjects in *kanshi* poets based themselves on shared images meant to be followed by many people while at the

same time adding their own originality. (Suzuki 2004a, Suzuki 2011)

· It is necessary to survey the expressions used in Japanese *kanshi* from before the Nara 奈良 period down to the Meiji 明治 era. (Suzuki 2013a)

#### *Examination of polysemy*

· In the case of short poems, there are instances in which several interpretations may arise, and the reader’s position becomes clear depending on which interpretation he or she chooses. Furthermore, even if the diversity of interpretations is in the end not resolved, the poem’s value is not reduced because of this. Rather, one can sense a plenitude in the diversity of interpretations. (Suzuki 2007)

#### *Writing about living spaces*

· The distinctive qualities of Edo poetry become clearer when one introduces the perspective of poetic modes of expression for describing people’s living spaces. By paying attention in particular to “insect cages,” one’s attention is drawn not only to insects chirping in the fields but also to insects in cages. Here there is a gaze directed not at singing of nature itself but at understanding nature in relation to human everyday life. (Suzuki 1998)

#### *Connections with painting*

· During the early modern period pictorial elements infiltrated widely into society and everyday life. Deeper connections with the pictorial emerged in *waka* too, a typical example being poems about paintings that were inscribed in blank spaces in paintings (*gasan* 画賛). Previously the subject matter of *waka* had tended to become fixed on account of a *waka*-type sense of beauty, but it expanded through *gasan*, and poetry also learnt pictorial composition and a sense of colour. (Suzuki 1998)

On the Study of Early Modern “Elegant” Literature (Suzuki Ken’ichi)

• Words permit diverse interpretations. Paintings, on the other hand, present a concrete world together with a powerful impression. During the early modern period, when interactions between poetry and painting existed in various forms not limited to *gasan*, there emerged a culture of a high order in which words and images elevated each other. (Suzuki 1998)

(3) Reinterpreting the nature of Japanese literature by retracing the history of the reception of the classics and the history of their commentaries, with a special focus on distinctive qualities of the reception of the classics and commentaries during the early modern period.

*The significance of studying the history of the reception of the classics and the history of their commentaries*

• The classics have been assimilated by various works of literature and interpreted through many studies right down to the period in which we live today. For example, the period when the *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 was composed is not directly connected to the present day, and there has been a history of the reception of and commentaries on the *Genji monogatari* during the Kamakura 鎌倉, Muromachi 室町, Edo, and modern periods, with the current reading of the *Genji monogatari* being founded on this accumulated history. Consequently, there is a need to situate the meaning of our present-day reading of the classics in the long flow of time by apprising ourselves of the situation in the intervening periods.

*The reception of modes of expression found in classical works*

• The section on Akutagawa 芥川 in the *Ise monogatari* 伊勢物語 is an especially well-known section of this work, and it entered widely into early modern literary expression. (Suzuki 2001)

• Distinctive qualities of classical literature come to light when one takes up only the opening sections of works such as the *Genji monogatari*, *Heike monogatari* 平家物語, *Taketori monogatari* 竹取物語, *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子, and *Oku no hosomichi* おくのほそ道 and elucidates the earlier expressions on which they are based and the influence they exerted on the genesis of literature in later times. Key terms are commonality and individuality. A distinctive quality of classical literature is that by relying on language and a sense of beauty possessing a commonality that moves many people it is conversely able to allow its individuality to shine through. (Suzuki 2006)

• The reception of the classics in the Edo period and the study of this by us today can in its entirety be called the “study of the appreciation of classical literature in the Edo period.” The aim of this is to comprehensively explore the value that individual works of literature from the ancient through to the medieval periods had for early modern literature and also the significance that this has for us living today. (Suzuki 2011)

• How was the literature of the past received in the early modern period? The literature of the ancient period was given authority by scholars of national learning (*kokugaku* 国学), but there was a tendency for their abstract ideas to generate a momentum of their own, and the literature of the ancient period cannot be said to have been fleshed out to the same degree as Heian 平安 literature. Medieval literature had an enormous influence on drama, popular fiction (*gesaku* 戯作), and witty verse (*senryū* 川柳) of the early modern period, but it cannot be said to have had sufficient elements of “elegance.” By comparison, the literature of the Heian period has the highest level of elements of “elegance.” Yearnings for Heian court culture remained deep-rooted in the early modern period, and these yearnings were centred in particular on the *Genji monogatari*, *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集, and *Ise monogatari*. In addition, if literary expression as a whole prior to the early modern period, centred on Heian court culture, may be

characterized as “elegant,” then the foundations of early modern literature could be said to have been produced by setting the “popular” against this. (Suzuki 2011, Suzuki 2003, Suzuki 2004b)

*Commentaries on classical works*

• In the medieval period there was a shift from a secretive or esoteric stance to an evidence-based stance. During an age of strife and bloodshed Kyoto was laid waste, the culture of the court nobility spread to the provinces, and in conjunction with these developments the classical studies undertaken by linked-verse poets were also enriched. It was a time when men such as Ichijō Kanera 一条兼良, Sōgi 宗祇, Sanjōnishi Sanetaka, and Kiyohara Nobukata 清原宣賢 were active.

• During the early modern period a comprehensive marshalling of medieval scholarship was carried out by Kitamura Kigin 北村季吟 and others, and there was established a commentarial “format” that sought to make visible the world of a work of literature by means of headnotes and interlinear glosses. A breakaway from the idea of the secret transmission of interpretations was prompted by the spread of the culture of publishing. Points worthy of special mention include the evidentialism of Keichū 契沖, the appreciative approach of Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵, and the structural grasp of works by Motoori no Norinaga 本居宣長.

• In the modern period there were advances in more detailed historical investigations.

• While the classical studies of Keichū and later scholars have been highly rated, the marshalling and three-dimensional presentation of past achievements by Kitamura Kigin in particular is of great historical significance. (Suzuki 2014, Suzuki 2010b)

(4) Other topics

*Savouring the culture of Edo*



- Distinctive features of Edo culture become clearer by focusing on buckwheat (*soba* 蕎麦), which has since the second half of the eighteenth century been regarded as a food item symbolic of the regionality of Edo, and investigating how it was received with reference to the *Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵 legend, *ukiyo* 浮世絵, *haikai*, *senryū*, and *rakugo* 落語. (Suzuki 2010a)
- A wealth of literary images associated with place-names can be gleaned from the many illustrated guidebooks (*meisho zue* 名所図会) and similar works that were produced during the early modern period. (Suzuki 2004a, Ichiko and Suzuki 1996~97, etc.)

#### *Conceptualizing the history of Japanese literature*

- Up until now there have appeared many accounts of the history of Japanese literature, and there are several that have come to be regarded as standard reference works. Many of these list works and authors in chronological order and point out the characteristics of each period. It ought to be possible to construct a history of literature that differs from these past accounts by establishing approaches such as “animals” and “astronomical phenomena” so as to add freshness to such accounts. (Suzuki 2011~13, Suzuki 2014~15)

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