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Some Aspects of the New History of Japanese Literature

Abstract

This article discusses the concept of a new textbook of the history of Japanese literature commissioned by the Polish Scientific Publishers PWN in Warsaw, which was further developed during the writing process. The purpose of the book had to be decided before writing, as well as my thoughts on my earlier book on Japanese literature. To start, it was necessary to decide on the division of the contents into periods, as well as the genres and problems within a given epoch. It was also necessary to take into consideration the scope of civilization information introduced into the history of literature, the degree of dependence of Japanese literature on the literatures of neighboring countries, as well as on European and American literatures. I call the aforementioned matters *aspects* – points of view on the ways these problems are dealt with in the contents of the publication, and explain the contents comprised of the outlines of six epochs, with the onset of contacts with China in the 6th century AD. Proceeding to the most complex period in the history of Japanese literature, i.e. the 19th and 20th century, I touch on problems of “masculinity” of literature. In most of the textbooks authors and critics are men, hence I decided to examine the role of female writers in the most important trends of literature in the 20th century.

Keywords: literature, Japanese, history of literature, textbook

The topic of this paper is the presentation of the concept of a new Polish textbook for the study of the history of Japanese literature.¹ To start with, it was necessary to

¹ Melanowicz, M., *Historia literatury japońskiej* [The History of Japanese Literature]. The approximately 30 printed sheet book was commissioned by the Polish Scientific Publishers PWN in Warsaw, and published in May 2011.

decide on the division of the material into periods, as well as to specify the genres and problems within a given epoch. The scope of the civilization information introduced into the history of literature needed to be considered as well.²

Moreover, it was not possible to avoid presenting the degree of dependence of Japanese literature on the literatures of neighbour countries, as well as the influence of such distant literatures as European and American. I call the aforementioned matters *aspects* – points of view on the ways these problems are dealt with in the contents of a publication called a textbook.

Historia literatury japońskiej (The History of Japanese Literature), which I have recently written (commissioned by PWN Publishing House) is primarily addressed to undergraduates of Japanese studies (Japanese philology, cultural and Oriental studies with a Japanese specialization) attending classes on Japanese literature and culture. The book is also a compendium for those who learn the Japanese language and who are interested in Japanese culture in general.

It should be noted that *Literatura japońska* [Japanese Literature]³ was published in the mid-1990s in three volumes. The first volume contained an outline of the historical process, particularly the development of literary forms and genres up to the nineteenth century. In the following volumes more focus was placed on the twentieth century: prose was presented in the second volume, and poetry and theatre in the third. Hence, this was not a coherent picture of the history of literature, as each of the three volumes was based on a different pattern: the first one resembled the formula of a textbook for the study of the history of literature from its beginning to the mid-nineteenth century, and more precisely, to the moment when Tokugawas' regime was overthrown. The second volume contained presentations of novels and short stories from the beginning of the process of civilization and cultural changes in Japan influenced by the West in the latter part of the nineteenth century, up to the 1990s. The third volume serves as a kind of supplement to the second. The picture of Japanese literature becoming modern, and seen through the eyes of artistic prose, was enhanced with the history of the main trends in poetry and drama, biographies of writers and their works, which were created and subjected to identical social and political impulses as prose was at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries. Thus, they were part of the same, complex process. Poems and theatrical plays of that time were often experimental and precursory to more successful stylistic forms of prose expression. When previously writing about poetry and drama, even though I did not intentionally ignore achievements in the field of novel,

² I make a distinction between the two terms. I think of civilization, as “the external sphere” in the life of communities, that is the institutions, legal, political and technological systems (according to Itō Shuntarō); whereas culture in this understanding is the “internal sphere” of human activity. Thus, it encompasses literature, philosophy, religion as a belief, and other creations of the spirit.

³ Melanowicz, M., *Literatura japońska – Od VI do połowy XIX w.* [Japanese Literature – From the 6th to the Mid-19th Cent.], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1994; *Literatura japońska – proza XX w.* [Japanese Literature – 20th Century Prose], 1994; *Literatura japońska – poezja XX w., teatr XX w.* [Japanese Literature – 20th Century Poetry and Theatre], 1996.

I did not make any attempts to simultaneously present all the genres and forms created within one literary period or school. I rather made an artificial division into prose, poetry, and drama (skipping criticism), despite the fact that many authors started their literary careers writing poems, and subsequently concentrated on prose, and sometimes also on drama.

In afterthought, I would say that this was not a coherent picture of the whole process of literature creation. At that time I was not basing my thoughts on any of the already classic (Aston, Florenz⁴), or later (Keene, Katō, Konishi⁵) textbooks. The layout of the work and its particular implementation drew more from the experience I had gained during my studies at Waseda University (1964–1966, 1971–1972) and from Japanese textbooks.⁶ At that time I was influenced most by a compendium entitled *Nihon bungakushi no shidō to jissai* (History of Japanese Literature – guide and [didactic] practice)⁷, published by Meiji Shoin, who specializes in, among other subjects, fundamental treatises on Japanese literature.

The new *History of Japanese Literature*, on the other hand, was conceived as one comprehensive text, comprised of the outlines of six epochs which make up the panorama of Japanese literature, and takes into account the richness of forms and genres characteristic of each epoch. In the presentation of the first epoch, i.e. antiquity (the Nara epoch, 8th cent.), poetry dominates, whereas in late antiquity (the Heian epoch, 9th–12th cent.) the main focus is on court tales. In the third part, devoted to the Middle Ages, emphasis has been put on war epics and memoirs (the Kamakura epoch, 12th–14th cent.), and in the latter part, devoted to the late Middle Ages (the Muromachi epoch, 14th–16th cent.) – the focus is on drama and the *nō* theatre, as well as the popularization of these three genres in modern times (the Edo epoch, 18th–19th cent.). Owing to their rampant growth and important educational and social roles in the twentieth century, novels and short stories have been emphasized.

In the literary panorama of the early period most space has been devoted to collective works, such as anthologies *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, ca. 781 A.D.), *Kokinshū* (The Anthology of [Japanese Poetry] Old and Contemporary, 905 A.D.), *Shinkokinshū* (The New Anthology of [Japanese Poetry] Old and Contemporary,

⁴ Aston W.G., *A History of Japanese Literature*, London 1899; Florenz K., *Geschichte der japanischen Literatur*, 2nd ed., Leipzig 1909.

⁵ Katō Shūichi, *A History of Japanese Literature*, Paul Norbury Publications, 1979; Keene, D., *Seeds in the Heart. Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century*, New York 1993; ditto, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600–1867*, London 1976; ditto, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of Modern Era. Fiction*, New York 1984; ditto, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of Modern Era. Poetry, Drama, Criticism*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1984.

⁶ Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, Yoshida Seiichi, *Nihon bungakushi* (History of Japanese Literature), Shibundō, Tokyo 1977; Takagi Ichinosuke, Takeuchi Rizō, *Nihon bungaku no rekishi*, Kadokawa Shoten, 1967 (received as a gift from the film director Ōshima Nagisa and his wife after their visit to Poland in 1968).

⁷ Authors of this non-standard textbook from 1965 (first edition in 1960) are: Asao Isoji, Ichiko Teiji, Gomi Chieï, Hasegawa Izumi, Kodaka Toshirō.

1205 A.D.)⁸. Individual literary works have also been marked, such as *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Prince Genji, from 1008 A.D.) written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, the anonymous war story *Heike monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike Clan, ca. 1240 A.D.), dramas of Zeami (14th–15th cent.), novels of Ihara Saikaku (17th cent.) and the twentieth-century novels of Natsume Sōseki, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Abe Kōbō, Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Haruki. Much space has also been given to the *nō* theatre and drama, the urban *kabuki* theatre and the puppet theatre *bunraku*, as well as to the *haikai* poetry (*haiku*), as original symbolic forms, enriching the repertoire of the codes of Japanese culture known in the world.

The factographic material has been put in order according to the chronology of individual genres – poetic, epic and dramaturgy. In this chronology – like in the European tradition – the following epochs have been distinguished: antiquity, Middle Ages, and modern times, as well as the “contemporary period”, that is the 20th century. These universal terms, however, have local, (Japanese) meanings and conditioning. From the Japanese perspective they do not belong to the same periods, and are not parallel to the European ones. This means that the Japanese “antiquity” corresponds rather to the time of the European Middle Ages. And so we can say that the Japanese have their own vision of “antiquity” (*kodai*) and the “Middle Ages” (*chūsei*), which they situate in different times than the European epochs. That is why the description of Japanese literature and culture has been preceded by a presentation of the principles according to which the history of Japan has been divided.

Particularly serious problems arise when we try to use the names of intellectual and literary trends and formations, like *Renaissance*, *Baroque*, *Classicism*, *Enlightenment*, *Romanticism*, *Realism* or *Positivism*, which are also the names of cultural and literary epochs in Europe. The use of each of those names is accompanied by a commentary which usually limits the possibility of their free use in Japan. However, sometimes questions are posed concerning the Japanese “Renaissance” or even “Baroque”. Such questions and attempts at giving answers to them allow – in a comparative perspective – to bring closer the possibility of comparing the names of epochs and periods, names which are fundamental for putting the history of Japanese culture, including literature, into order.

It is important for understanding the dynamics of the development of literature to pay attention to the distinctiveness of literary forms and figures which were born and played an important part in shaping literary styles before the “Europeanization” of Japan. Also important are the relations and comparisons with literatures of Japan’s geographic neighbours, especially with China, which, for Japan’s early history, played a role similar to that of Greece and Rome for the rest of Europe, although Japan has never been conquered by China nor become its vassal. However, in the early period of shaping their statehood the Japanese turned to China for their system of writing, architecture, arts, as well as the

⁸ In the translation of the titles of anthologies, the “Japanese song” (*waka*) has been replaced with the term “Japanese poetry”, as more adequate, although in the Japanese tradition native poetry was called a song (*uta*, *waka*).

continental religions and thought systems – Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism – often making fundamental changes in the process of their Japanization.

I have also tried to answer the questions concerning the relationship between literature and philosophy, particularly because in ancient Japan there was no philosophical discipline comparable to Greek philosophy. There is no doubt, however, that there existed philosophical thought which originated in Japan, but it was contained mainly in Buddhist and Confucian treatises, although belles-lettres were also a rich source for the expression of the philosophy of life. This is because literature was an important tool of educating the nation.

Japan in East Asia

The introductory reflections begin with the presentation of Japan's geographical position in East Asia, in order to explain that Japan had been shaping its statehood on the Japanese Archipelago for several millennia. It had been developing in the vicinity and in the sphere of influence of East Asian cultures, the centre of which was China, or rather the countries known in ancient Japan under the names of dynasties, such as Han, Sui, Tang, Sung (Song), Yuan (Mongolian dynasty), Ming, and Qing (Manchu dynasty).

Due to the first contacts with China in the sixth century A.D., Japan began to embrace the cultural and civilization values of the Han country (Kan in Sino-Japanese) sending emissaries (*kenzuishi*) to Sui, and later to Tang (*kentōshi*). The Japanese – at that time their country bore the name of Yamato – were becoming acquainted with Chinese culture through Korea, or rather the then kingdoms of Paekche and Silla, which they reached by sea via the Tsushima islands. Emissaries, monks, students, and merchants were travelling directly to China also from the ports of Hakata and Bōnotsu on Kyushu. Trade contacts were maintained with China also via the Ryukyu Kingdom.

The system of writing and Buddhism, the most important features of Chinese culture (direct or indirect), reached Japan due to the early links between the Japanese and the peoples of the Korean Peninsula. They enthusiastically adopted many of Chinese achievements, however, they did not allow themselves to assimilate and quickly freed themselves from direct Chinese influence.

In spite of the geographical proximity, the Japanese did not belong to the peoples of Chinese origin. They also worshipped different gods. Apart from that, they had different dwellings, clothes, and their own patterns of behaviour. They had been creating oral literature for many centuries before adopting the writing system and Buddhism from Korea and China. They also governed their country differently, which in the early historical times occupied small territories around Naniwa (today Osaka), Nara, and Kyoto, and later, in the Middle Ages, spread to almost the whole of the Japanese Archipelago. The above mentioned differences between China and Japan existed not only in the distant antiquity. They were also preserved in the period of assimilation of Chinese civilization

in the epochs of Yamato (Epoch of Burial Mounds), Nara and Heian, that is between the sixth and the twelfth centuries, and later, especially from the eighteenth century.

Since the earliest times the Japanese have possessed the ability to discard or modify foreign values. Such a theory can be posed only on the basis of the effects of cultural development, since we do not have credible and sufficient sources to conduct significant comparative studies of ancient Japanese-Chinese connections. However, proof of this theory is found both in the development of Buddhism specific to Japan as well as in Japanese literature, beginning with the poetic anthology *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, 8th cent.) and the prose of the aristocrats of the tenth and eleventh centuries, whose greatest masterpiece is *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Prince Genji, 1008 A.D.).

In the following centuries the dominant trend of this literature began to reflect the likes and the achievements of the ruling class, namely the military nobility, called *bushi* (the samurai). This occurred after the victories of the Minamoto clan (12th cent.). The epic testimony of those days became the *Heike monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike Clan, ?1240 A.D.). That time in Japanese historiography is also the beginning of the Middle Ages, lasting till the end of the sixteenth century. Owing to the continuation of the native aristocratic cultural patterns also in that epoch, as well as to the efforts aimed at assimilating foreign patterns, the Japanese created original literature – both in form and in content, which became a great contribution to the treasury of world literature.

Division into periods and the outline of history

In this textbook the history of Japanese literature has been traditionally divided into epochs whose names are identical with the names of geographic centres of politics and culture. The epochs are as follows:

- 1 Yamato (6th–7th cent.), during which we also distinguish the cultures of Asuka (?552–645 A.D.) and Hakuho (645–710 A.D.), and in historiography this period is also called the Epoch of Burial Mounds (precisely the archeological epoch *kofun jidai* – ca. 250–538 A.D.);
- 2 Nara (8th cent.), during which we also distinguish the Tempyō era (722–748 A.D.);
- 3 Heian (9th–12th cent.), the period of dominance of the Fujiwara clan;
- 4 Kamakura (13th–14th cent.), the period of dominance of the Minamoto and Hōjō clans;
- 5 Muromachi (14th–16th cent.), the period of dominance of the Ashikaga dynasty shoguns;
- 6 Edo (17th–19th cent.), the period of dominance of the Tokugawa clan shoguns;
- 7 The contemporary period, when the political and cultural centre is Tokyo. This period is divided into eras of ruling emperors:
 - Meiji (1868–1912)
 - Taishō (1912–1926)
 - Shōwa (1926–1989)
 - Heisei (1989–)

The division into periods following that of universal history has also been adopted:

1. antiquity (until the 12th cent.), Jap. *kodai*, *jōdai*, *chūko*;
2. Middle Ages (12th–16th cent.), Jap. *chūsei*;
3. modern times (16th–19th cent.), Jap. *kinsei*;
4. contemporary period (since 1868) is divided into earlier (*kindai*, till the end of the Second World War, 1945) and later part (*gendai* – “contemporary time”, “present time” – or *senjo* – post-war time).

In this outline I have included the majority of works previously highlighted in Japanese textbooks and other compendiums of native literature. This means that I do not even name all the works written on the Japanese Archipelago, which shows their great number. I present the evolution of genres and forms in the Japanese language, practically skipping the literary output written in Chinese. In the initial part, the pre-writing era (prior to the 6th cent.), I discuss the oral epic forms: myths, legends, *norito* prayers, *setsuwa* tales, as well as lyrical forms known as songs (*uta*, *waka*, *kayō*). They have been preserved in *Kojiki*, or *The Book of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*, 712 A.D.; Polish translation ed. 1986), *Nihonshoki*, also known as *Nihongi* (Japanese Chronicle, 720 A.D.) and in *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, after 759 A.D., around 781 A.D.).

I take into consideration some selected written monuments, but not literature, like codes of criminal and administrative law (*Ōmi-ryō*, 689 A.D., and *Taihō-ryō*, 702 A.D.), and the role played by emperors, as well as Korean and Chinese scribes, in the development of literature. It was on the initiative of the ruling Empress Gemmei (708–714 A.D.) that the first chronicles and descriptions of land and customs were written down. Of great significance to the development of literature was the construction of a permanent capital city in the Yamato Valley and the move of the imperial court to the residence in Heijō-kyō (lit. ‘The Capital/City of Peace’), in the city of Nara, which took place in 710 A.D. and began the era in which the courts and Buddhist culture flourished.

The official language in contacts with the continent was Chinese, however practical use of this language was narrowed to the circle of officials and monks. In the beginning the scribes were Korean and Chinese. Their Japanese disciples often distorted the rules of the Chinese language and hence many sentences in the chronicles have features of the courtiers’ native language. Out of many attempts at composing poems in Chinese, a collection of 64 works entitled *Kaifūsō* (The Old Favourite Verses, 751 A.D.) from the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century has been preserved which shows the imitation of Chinese poets, rather than the author’s invention.

Courtiers and literary men were educated according to Chinese models in several types of schools, e.g. in the Department of Education of the Ministry of Ceremonies – in the specializations of history, literature, Confucianism, law and mathematics. The Ommyō Department (Department of Yin and Yang) was responsible for the education of astrologers, fortune-tellers and calendar makers. Medical schools educated natural medicine practitioners, magicians, herbalists and acupuncture specialists. Many monks and officials went to study in China.

The works preserved from that period show the existence of a rich literature transmitted orally, for example, by the storytellers (*kataribe*) on the Japanese Archipelago. The oldest texts were written down with the use of Chinese characters in Japanese (*Kojiki*) and Chinese (*Nihongi*). Also the native poetry was written down with Chinese characters in Japanese. In antiquity (we may also say “in the Japanese antiquity”, in the time of the Nara epoch) there was the development of poetry and chronicle prose. And in the Heian epoch, it was the artistic prose that flourished – short stories, tales and novels – to an extent not encountered anywhere else in the world.

“Masculinity” of literature

Proceeding to the most complex period in the history of Japanese literature, namely, the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, I will mention the need to introduce several innovations in the layout of material and placement of accents. First of all, in the previous compendiums of Japanese literature men were given the dominant place. In the twentieth century, we see men as representatives of naturalists (Tayama Katai, Shimazaki Tōson, Masamune Hakuchō etc.), idealists (Arishma Takeo, Shiga Naoya, Mushanokōji Saneatsu), aesthetes (Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Nagai Kafū, Satō Haruo) etc. I would like to point out here that at the end of the nineteenth century (Ozaki Kōyō, Kōda Rohan) there is one female writer mentioned (Higuchi Ichiyō) among pseudo-classics. This is proof of the theory of “masculinity” of the most outstanding works of literature almost until the end of the twentieth century.

Moreover, when we look through the authors of textbooks, we also very rarely see names of women (apart from specialist works devoted to “feminine literature”). Thus, we may also claim that it is men who decide about the contents of textbooks. Of course, we cannot draw the simple conclusion that this is the reason for the definite majority of men among the honoured artists. However, a person who is writing a new textbook must pay more attention to this problem than it has been done before, and at least should not multiply the textbook stereotypes, but make an effort to examine the role of female writers in the most important trends of literature in the twentieth century. I made such an attempt and concluded that there are gaps in this matter. That is why I included a chapter entitled “The Awakening of Women”, in which I discuss the visible activity of female writers at the end of the Meiji era and the beginning of Taishō, i.e. in the years 1910–1916. At that time a great variety of women writers appeared, their names remaining in the shadow of men who were writing at the same time. Many of these women do deserve to be remembered by the critics, particularly because it was the time of debut for many women writers who became famous in mid-century and who encouraged women to express their feelings artistically. Owing to a revolution in education after the Second World War, many prominent female writers emerged, often called the successors of Lady Murasaki, the author of the most famous Japanese story entitled *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, 1008 A.D.).

Certainly, among aspects worth mentioning, we can include many other specialist problems, such as the way poetry, drama and criticism have been presented, in order to balance and appreciate in the textbook the significance of achievements of poets, dramatists and critics. Worth considering is the explanation of the role played by the Koreans and other national minorities writing in Japanese. I will, however, leave these aspects for later examination.