

Tyrus Torres

JAPN 305: Japanese Culture and Civilization

Dr. Dustin Wright

2019/02/28

Writing Response 4

[Google Link](#)

### **Class in Heian Era**

During the Heian era in Japan, the courtiers and upper class indulged in the life of comfort, taking pride in their grace, eloquence, and high art. This extravagant court life was often romanticized in various forms of literatures. From *The Tale of Genji* we can look more into how societal portrayals reflected class mobility and or lack there of. Briefly I will discuss evidence from *The Tale of Genji* that highlights the lack of mobility from lower classes to higher classes but also show some exceptions found within fiction.

Lower classes weren't apt permitted to become someone of renown, in the conversations with Uma-no-kami and Tou Shikibu-no jou it was discussed how "even when a man rises in the world, people will reject him if his lineage doesn't fit his new status" (43). Take for example the character Shikibu, who was asked to give his own story about love and women, he labeled himself as "the lowliest of the low", and after pressure from the other gentleman he told his relations with an educated women (55). After Shikibu's story of his earnest experience, the others being of higher status ridiculed him and the women in the story. However the role of the middle and lower classes weren't necessarily shamed, just an understood rule, "the superior accepts help from the inferior, the inferior defers to the superior" (45). This quote reflects societal ranking, but also insights on the dynamic of gender norms during this time, women in the court were still looked at as inferior in most cases. Even if a women became well versed in Chinese histories and annals she may still receive criticism (57). The exceptions for women in entering a higher court was dependent on how a man viewed her and her own beauty.

Beauty and appearance was a key rule into being respected and could even aid or hinder a society's respect for an individual. Genji wasn't the even the crown prince,

however the emperor made a point to treat him with biased affection. Genji was even given a capping ceremony as grand as the crown prince himself (37). Even the Minister of the Left favored Genji to some degree allowing his daughter to bed with Genji, but not with the Crown Prince who favored her (38, 40). This same idea of beauty and grace applied to women as well, however it was a much more judgemental thing to allow a middle class women into the services of the court (44-45). If however one's image was tarnished it would lead to gossip and problems for a courters life. If a courtier was seen galavanting with non-discreet affairs their respect would be diminished, as well as if a courtier were walking among a commoners' daily lifestyle (41,66). Another way for class mobility to be accessed was through the religious faith of buddhism, as it was a revered societal pillar.

Religion was a key step in crafting one's image, even if someone was a commoner of of middle class standing, seeking a religious identity superseded you into a social golden zone. The monk Harima built his life into the religious office in order to secure his life as a prestigious monk rather than a layman (86). Religion in the concept of class mobility also acted as a door out of the court life, if the constant image tailoring or the constant gossiping wasn't in someone's ideal lifestyle they could seek a life of religious devotion (87). Religion as also a key part of the Upper Class' image and often required the courtiers to show great respect for buddhist practice, rituals, and advice. Though religion could help craft an connection to the revered, the reality of the Heian Era was a bit duller than fiction portrays.

The Heian Era society favored the lifestyle of the wealthy. Even though there were exceptions to one's status at birth, the system remained fairly rigid placing the lifestyles of the the upper class above the lower's. For these reasons I would conclude that the society was seemingly inflexible, and somewhat constraining for those born inside and outside of the court lifestyle.