

THE PILLOW BOOK AND THE JAPANESE MINDSET

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Ancient Japanese literature conveys the essence of Japanese people's emotions through subtle descriptions of the seasons and natural elements. Professor Etsuko Akama of Jumonji University, a researcher in Heian literature such as Makura no Soushi (The Pillow Book), illuminates these intricacies of expression for generations less familiar with Japanese classics.



Professor Etsuko Akama of Jumonji University explains the intricacies of Heian literature to generations less familiar with Japanese classics

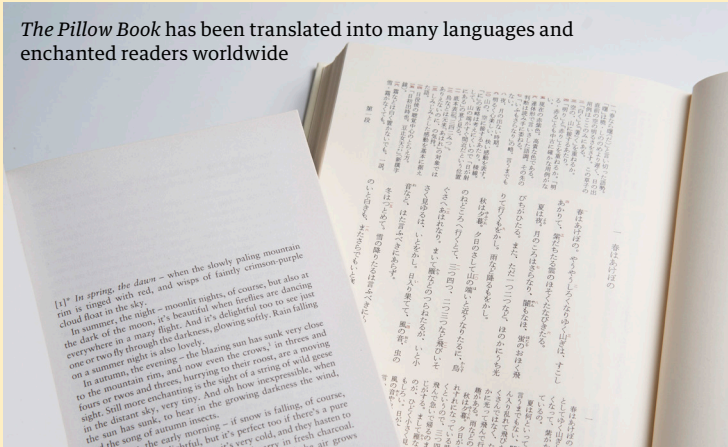
“THE charm of *The Pillow Book* derives from beautiful depictions of the four seasons by Lady Sei Shonagon, who wrote over a thousand years ago in the Heian Period (794-1185),” explains professor Etsuko Akama of Jumonji University. “Starting with the famous opening line, ‘In spring, the dawn—when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red...’ she incorporates seasonality by showcasing the highlights of each season, which are carefully depicted and blended in her prose.”

In the first paragraph that starts with the above line, the writer describes how the sky of Higashiyama in Kyoto changes color as the sun rises, along with the fireflies that illuminate the summer night. “Her descriptions convey a sense of movement, almost like a video posted on social media,” says Akama. Shonagon’s prose allows the reader to visualize the scene, and the distinctive characterizations through the senses—the chirps of the insects, the fragrance of irises and the drenching storm against the face—enthral readers.

As her writing progresses, you

can also spot many noteworthy plays on words and witty ideas. For instance, “near yet far” is used to describe the last day of the year and the New Year, as well as relationships with family members one doesn’t get along with, while “far yet near” is used to portray the Buddhist paradise and relationships between men and women. Her words are similar to those of modern women, mixing humor and sarcasm: the pleasure she finds when a hated person has a bad experience, noting that there is nothing more interesting than gossiping about others, or pointing out that sermons are better when

The Pillow Book has been translated into many languages and enchanted readers worldwide



Kiyohara no Motosuke, was a famous poet, so she grew up surrounded by books, reading, studying *kanji* characters and gaining wonderful writing skills. At the time, upper-class women were hidden away from society once they married. However, Shonagon thought that women should know more about the world. At court, she met Empress Teishi, which resulted in the birth of “seraglio literature” and *The Pillow Book*.

“Although Empress Teishi’s family soon fell to ruin and she died shortly afterward, thanks to Sei Shonagon this florid seraglio literature was preserved for posterity,” Akama notes.

The Heian Period was the longest in Japanese history, lasting for over four hundred years. Although there were political issues, it was a peaceful time without any wars. It was also an age of imperial aristocracy, and through complex human relationships and romantic emotions, many forms of expressions were born through self-reflection, suffering, weakness, craftiness and fear.

“Chirps of insects not being considered noise but rather something soothing is an aesthetic specific to Japanese people,” Akama says. “It’s likely that this form of emotional expression derives from the Shinto belief that trees, insects and even words contain a soul, and that we are surrounded by eight million *kami* (gods).”

These and other emotions of Heian people from over a thousand years ago still live within the hearts and minds of modern Japanese. 7



Sei Shonagon’s humor and intricate observations about life in the Heian Period are at the heart of *The Pillow Book*’s charm

the lecturer is a handsome man. “Sei Shonagon was talented at expressing people’s honest feelings through her writing,” Akama states.

It’s been said that female writers first appeared in Japan during the Heian Period and women’s literature flourished. Prior to that time, Japan’s written language was entirely based on *kanji* (Chinese characters), and it was considered vulgar for women to learn to write in this “men’s language.” However, during the Heian Period a new and simpler form of writing called *hiragana* was devised. This made it

possible to print an anthology of poetry called the *Kokin Wakashu* in native Japanese instead of the classic Chinese characters. This sparked a revival in Japanese literature.

According to Akama, women became leading figures in literary studies during this time, with a focus on intricate descriptions derived from observation and emotions. Even in the modern dictionary of classic Japanese words, explanations for emotional adjectives are referenced from women’s literature.

Sei Shonagon’s father,