

New manuscript discovered of *The Tale of Genji*, the 11th century Japanese novel

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Last month the Japanese cultural preservation foundation, Reizei Shiguretei Bunko, announced it had discovered the oldest written copy of a chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, an extended prose work written during the Heian Period (794-1185) and attributed to noblewoman and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu, also known as Lady Murasaki. She is believed to have written the book sometime between 1000 and 1012.

The manuscript of the chapter was discovered in a box belonging to 72-year old Motofuyu Okochi, a descendant of the former rulers of the Mikawa-Yoshida feudal domain in the southeast of Japan's largest Island, Honshu. The work is believed to have been held by the Okochi family since 1743.

Experts confirmed that the manuscript, 122 pages long, is in the handwriting of the famed poet Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241), who, it is believed, copied an early version of Lady Murasaki's manuscript. Only four other manuscripts in existence are thought to have been transcribed by Teika. His transcriptions of the chapters predate any other version of *Genji* by as much as 300 years.

According to the *Guardian*, "The [Reizei Shiguretei Bunko] foundation said although the newly-found manuscript 'mostly' matches the common version of the story, there are some grammatical differences."

The Tale of Genji is one of the most significant works of world literature. It concerns the life, from childhood to death, of a prince of the royal court named Genji, as well as the lives of members of his family and acquaintances. The work is centered around the imperial palace and aristocratic houses in the Heian capital of Heian-kyo on the site of modern Kyoto.

The Heian Period was initially significant for its extensive cultural borrowing from China, then ruled by

the Tang and Song Dynasties. But by the time of the composition of *The Tale of Genji*, Japan had moved toward a greater cultural isolation in which native Japanese traditions began to reassert themselves. It is the period in which Buddhism spread throughout Japan and the characters in the work have a distinctly Buddhist outlook.

Only men were permitted to read and write in Chinese, and women, including Murasaki, composed their works in the Japanese language using the script known as *kana*.

The work depicts the intimate lives of the Japanese ruling class of the time and the complex and subtle culture that it developed. Although life was defined—by elaborate ritual and etiquette, love, loyalty (and disloyalty), envy and anger are both distinctly distant to moderns but also familiar and at times moving.

One notable feature of *The Tale of Genji* is its sensitivity to the natural world. Flowers, trees, the wind and rain, the sun and moon, the changing of the seasons, all play a significant role in how characters understand their relationships and their own emotions. What remains of this long-deceased social order in *The Tale of Genji* and other works is a certain delicacy and grace.

In his work devoted to *The Tale of Genji*, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (1964), British-born literary historian Ivan Morris offered insight into how Lady Murasaki and her contemporaries would have viewed literature and its relation to reality. In this remarkable scene, in Morris' own translation, Genji has walked into a roomful of women and seen prose novels scattered about, which the women are reading. He is scornful at first:

"You women are incorrigible. Sometimes I wonder

whether you haven't been born into this world just so that you can be deceived by people. Look at these books! There probably isn't an ounce of truth in the lot of them.” The women argue with him and Genji is soon persuaded of the value of reading fiction.

“‘Yes,’ said Genji, ‘it was rather churlish of me to speak badly about these books as I did just now. For the fact is that works of fiction set down things that have happened in this world ever since the days of the gods. Writings like *The Chronicles of Japan* really give only one side of the picture, whereas these romances must be full of just the right sort of details.’

“He smiled and continued, ‘The author certainly does not write about specific people, recording all the actual circumstances of their lives. Rather it is a matter of his being so moved by things, both good and bad, which he has heard and seen happening to men and women that he cannot keep it all to himself but wants to commit it to writing and make it known to other people—even to those of later generations. This, I feel sure, is the origin of fiction.

“‘Sometimes the author will want to write favourably about people, and then he will select all the good qualities he can think of; at other times, when he wants to give a fuller description of human nature, he introduces all sorts of strange and wicked things into his book. But in every case the things he writes about will belong to this actual world of ours.’”

The recently discovered chapter is called “Wakamurasaki” and concerns the time when the young prince Genji meets the child Murasaki who will later become his wife. The language of the period is notoriously difficult to interpret, and the early manuscript will undoubtedly help to clarify the meaning and intentions of the author.



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