

FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON JAPANESE LITERATURE —A SURVEY

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Foreign influences on Japanese literature may be divided into the following two groups: those from Oriental countries and those from Occidental countries. The former consists of language and thoughts mostly; they came from India and China. From the former Japan received Buddhism. This was first introduced into this country around 552—about the time Christianity was brought to Great Britain. It was done by way of China and Korea. This religion has had tremendous influence upon the Japanese and constitutes a no small part of the Japanese view of life. But as with many cases of religious literature, Japanese Buddhistic literature is not the direct offspring of Indian Buddhistic literature. This faith had to be cherished by the people for some time before its traces became visible in our literature during the twelfth century.

Chinese learning was brought to Japan by Korean scholars in 284. Excepting Confucianism, Chinese characters are perhaps the most valuable contribution from this neighboring country. The Japanese adopted this means of writing, and while some men of letters and learning wrote with only those imported ideographs in the manner of Chinese, others developed Japanese alphabetical letters from these characters. And out of these two different ways of recording there developed two trends of literature. Naturally the former has had Chinese poetry and prose for its model and it has never developed much in its own way; it has been imitative. The readers of this genre of literature have been more or less

limited among the comparatively few intellectual people. And at present it is hardly read by general lovers of *belles-lettres*. The Chinese influence on this branch of our literature has been exceedingly great but is not so important as the influence on the other branch which turned out to be the fountainhead of present-day Japanese literature.

The traces of Chinese influence are slightly visible in our earliest extant literature: folklore and poetry of the eighth century. They are Chinese beliefs and views of life. Later in the Yedo period (1603-1867) the study of Confucianism was encouraged by the government and pursued by some outstanding scholars. Chinese tales, romances and dramas—not poetry—became popular.

The influence of Chinese classics—mostly teachings of the wisdom of life—and later literary works is great, and detailed study, especially in the matter of source and reference, has been made by Japanese scholars. However, since the time Occidental influence began to be felt towards the end of the Yedo period, no more new inspirations have come to this country across the China Seas. By the time new impacts from Occidental countries began to be felt, both Buddhism and Chinese thoughts had been, so to speak, naturalized. The new trend of culture that was brought to Japan at this time was something strange to the Japanese, who had hardly been under any Occidental influence.

From the standpoint of modern literature that has developed since the Renaissance, Japan came into contact with it as late as the 1860's. But the Japanese had a foretaste of Western culture for a limited period of time about three hundred years before they came face to face with the advanced modern civilization just about one hundred years

ago, as mentioned a few lines above. The first visitors from the Western world were the Portuguese (c. 1543). The Spanish and Dutch followed. The traces that those early visitors left on our literature are seen in the Christian literature of the period and in some fragmentary translations of Greek and Latin classics—notably *Aesop's Fables*. Also from the existence of stories based on *Odyssey* and probably *Aeneid* it has been guessed that certain captains and merchants with some literary taste told stories to the Japanese.

After 1639, the year following the close of the riot of Christians in Shimabara against the government, only the Dutch were allowed to stay in Japan. From this time on, for over two hundred years, foreign trade, excepting that with China, was monopolized by Holland, and the glimpses of Western civilization the Japanese had were, so to speak, through the glasses held by the Dutch. However, hardly any literary influence was given to the Japanese during this long period. It is said that this was chiefly because the Dutch were not a literary people.

It was in the 1850's that European languages other than Dutch began to be studied in this country. (Commodore Perry's first visit to Japan was in 1853.) The translations of Western books—mostly geographical and historical—and newspapers gradually began to be made accessible to Japanese intellectual people. Thus the Japanese were introduced to modern Occidental civilization. It is generally admitted that Japan made such remarkable progress in the course of the half century that followed as has never been seen elsewhere. And there is no doubt that the most important impetus for this advance was Western culture, both spiritual and material. And just as the newly imported thoughts which were different from

the traditional Shintoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism started new ways of philosophical thinking, so modern Occidental literature gave birth to an altogether new literature in Japan. It is true that such genres as "tanka" and "hokku" —forms of poetry consisting of 31 and 17 syllables respectively— have remained after they were rejuvenated, but they are not the main currents in our new literature.

Occidental literature was introduced to the Japanese through numerous translations. The prevalence of the translations of Western literature is one of the outstanding features in our literature since the Meiji Restoration (1868), and especially up to about 1888 literary activities were distinguished more by the translation of Occidental literature than by native literary creation. The chief reasons for this were:

- 1) the people's interest in Western culture,
- 2) their reverence for Occidental literature as their model, and
- 3) some statesmen's encouragement of literary activities.

And as we go over the bulk of those translations —many of which are rare books now— examining them from such viewpoints as the choice of subject matters and authors, attitude of translators, and styles of translation, we see very remarkable progress from mere curiosity of the new, strange, and practical to deeper appreciation of serious literature dealing with the problems of life. At first the books of information on Western manners and those of politics and law were welcomed. The novels began to appear and about 1881-1882 political stories came to gain popularity among the intellectual readers of the time. Works of such British men of letters and statesmen as Bulwer Lytton, and Benjamin

Disraeli found much favor. This was the reflection of the people's interest in the establishment of a new political scheme. Purely literary works were also put into Japanese, but haphazardly. *The Arabian Nights*, *Decameron* and some of Shakespeare's plays were presented to the readers side by side with those mentioned above. Purely literary works and the more popular sort of writings were offered to the public. Translators had very little knowledge of the literature of other countries of the world. Neither did they try to be faithful to the original; they tried to make their translations read like Japanese works as much as possible. Perhaps the readers did not specially desire to appreciate foreign literary works as close to the original as we do now. The early translations were new and attractive enough for them.

The popularity of those translated works, and especially that of Japanese political stories which followed the wake of the readers' interest in foreign political stories, made a marked difference among the readers. The new literary works thus given birth to were appreciated by the intellectuals of the time. In those days native novels or romances were looked down upon; only Chinese poetry and prose were supposed to be high-brow literature. But the translation of such work as Lytton's *Earneſt Maltravers* (1878) gave a different view of romance to the intellectual people of the time. The style of translation was an imitation of the Japanese rendering of Chinese prose, and the conversation found in this book was fairly far from the colloquial style of the period—to us present-day readers it sounds extremely unnatural and frequently even ludicrous—but even this was liked because it was more of the Chinese literary style than that found in Japanese low-brow stories. To them it seemed

fresh and noble. They no longer felt that they were above the readings in the form of romance which found favor among the lower level of the people. And the fact that the translators were refined gentleman and not popular writers catering to sub-literary masses, led the readers of higher taste to change their contemptuous attitude toward romances or novels. They began to realize that literature was worth serious consideration, and also that it was available for the purpose of influencing others. This was the cause of the vogue of political novels which lasted till about 1890.

In the meantime the style of translation was polished and made more artistic and closer to the colloquial style, which was adopted later as the proper style for literary creation. Such outstanding translators as Ogai Mori, Shimei Futabatei, and Shiken Morita made good translations of German, Russian and English literary works respectively. Shiken translated French and Italian works also. This was from around 1885 onward, and their work was much superior to the translations of a decade previous. Also this meant the expansion of interest in European literature at large. This contrasted sharply with the prevalence of English literature up to that time. New Japanese literature was to be influenced more by Continental literature than by English literature. And the choice of literary masterpieces for translations came to be done from such viewpoints as artistic excellence and modernity. The works included various types of literature: romantic, realistic, tragic, and comical ones, adventures or detective stories, those good in plot or characterization, etc. And as such authors as Koyo Ozaki and Roban Koda tried by polishing their literary styles to create purely Japanese literature in opposition to the general tendency of blindly

following Western culture, and endeavored to rehabilitate Saikaku Ihara—a realistic writer of the Yedo period (1642–1696)—translators were influenced by this tendency and paid more attention to the styles of their works.

Writings on criticism or literary principles began to appear, showing that men of letters of the time became reflective. The first work was *Shosetsu Shinzui* (*Quintessence of Novel*) (1885) by Shoyo Tsubouchi who, basing his efforts on the knowledge he gathered from a few books on the history of English literature, some literary magazines, and several books on rhetoric, advocated realism in novel-writing. Ogai, mentioned above, criticized Shoyo's realistic view and propagated idealistic view of literature. He based his opinion on Hartman's *Die Philosophie des Schönen* which he studied during his four years' stay in Germany.

These two leading critics of the time also produced literary works which were the fruit of their appreciation and study of Western literature. A new Japanese literature was thus given birth to. Under foreign influences a new trend of literature was coming into existence. In the field of poetry, the publication of *Shintaishi Sho* (*Some Verses in New Form*) in 1882 by three promising instructors of the Tokyo Imperial University, who had been trained in foreign countries,¹ marked the departure for new poetry, which was quite different from the traditional Japanese poetry in form and, to a certain extent, in content.²

Shoyo was also an advocator of new dramas. His views of drama were based on his study of Shakespeare's plays. His admiration of this British dramatist, which continued till the end of his life, culminated in his translation of the complete works of Shakespeare, all by himself. Foreign plays

and principles of plays were in many cases introduced by Ogai and others whose chief interest was in German literature.⁸

Gradually around this time, the dominance of translation gave way, and the creation of native literature became more and more active. However, the new literature could never have been but for the influence of European literature. Such leading naturalistic authors as Doppo Kunikida, Katai Tayama, and Toson Shimazaki are said to have had a sort of literary conversion after reading the translation of Turgenev's *A Sportman's Sketches*. Naturalism crowned the foreign influence on Japanese literature. This rather pessimistic view of life and literature became prominent after the close of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Russian literature found more and more favor among the readers, whose idealistic views or religious aspirations were hampered by the difficulty of living, complexity of social life, increase of the objects of their desires, and sorrow that came from their disappointment in pursuing those. Guy de Maupassant gave the most influence at this time.

From this time on to World War I, our literary world was related very closely to the Western literary world. More and more translations were published. The number of those who appreciated foreign literary works in the original increased. The authors began to feel that they were hardly under any foreign influence. New literary movement in the Occident were at once made known to the Japanese lovers of literature. People who had been kept busy in understanding and following foreign literary tendencies—new ways to describe, to observe Nature and human psychology, etc.—finally caught up with them. Every phase of foreign literature had been imported. The complete works

of such outstanding writers as Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe were put into Japanese. Also many of the more modern men of letters had their complete works, or most of their chief works, translated. They were Carlyle, Poe, Hearn, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov; Mann, Hesse; Baudelaire, Balzac, Zola, Rolland, Gide, Valery, Proust, etc. Among these Tolstoy gave the greatest influence to our literature, more in his views of life than in literary style.

The above is only a brief survey. From the viewpoint of comparative literature, literary influences both received and given must be studied. However, at this stage in Japan the stress is placed on the study of the former. This is only natural; our country has received so much more than she has given. Marked interest in the cultural history of the Meiji era (1868-1912), which was noticeable for about twenty years before World War II, facilitated the study in this field. Some detailed study, in most cases bibliographical, has been done, such as the study of Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Emerson, Poe, Whitman. Also some writers who were active during the Meiji period have published works in the nature of literary reminiscences. However, all these are in part, and comprehensive study is yet to come. We feel that a good many people are interested in this field of scholarship and that the cooperation of these researchers is imperative. The result of their investigations should be reported in English as well as in Japanese.

The Japan Society of Comparative Literature, formed in 1948, is the organ that has tried to lead the study in this field. Members totalling nearly three hundred, include most of the scholars interested in this study. Besides the

annual general meeting and public lecture meetings, a monthly meeting is held, at which about fifty listen to reports on new comparative literary study made by some of the members.

Notes:

- 1 They were Ryokichi Yatabe (studied in America), Shoichi Toyama (in America and England), and Tetsujiro Inoue (in Germany).
- 2 Of the nineteen pieces included in this anthology, four were original poems and the rest were translations.
- 3 The foreign playwright who has enjoyed most popularity in this country is Ibsen.