# JAPANESE CULTURAL HISTORY – 19th Century

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**Introduction** Japanese culture was influenced extensively by Chinese and Korean civilization during the early years of its development. New ideas on technology, religion, language and more were well received by the ruling elites who were seeking normative structures for society. In particular, though Japan had its own religion known as Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism found a receptive population and was widely adopted in antiquity. Ideas on statehood, law, taxation, social structures and gender were also embraced in the years before the Nara era (710-794). In spite of this, Japanese culture retained a very strong sense of identity separate from that found on the mainland. Its position as a series of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean allowed its leadership to pick and choose what elements of culture it wanted to adopt and what elements it wished to discard. Like Great Britain, the ocean protected Japanese society from the worst forms of imperialism originating on the mainland. Because of this, Japanese society shares a number of cultural markers with China and Korea, but has its own unique heritage, culture and civilization.

## The 19th CENTURY

**The Literary Arts.** At the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, there were four official forms of the written language. They were *kanbun, sorobun, wabun* and *wakankonkobun. Kanbun* was Chinese style writing. *Sorobun* was the form used in everyday correspondence. *Wabun* was one which most closely reflected the spoken Japanese language several centuries before and *wakankonkobun* was a variant Chinese style with markers to indicate how they should be read in Japanese. None was the form of Japanese actually spoken by average Japanese in the Meiji period. In this environment, authors and language specialists took the lead writing Japan's first modern novels and transforming the expression of long form prose. Indeed, many scholars argue that this form of written Japanese acted as a template for the creation of the modern Japanese language.

**Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909)** was a student in the 1880s and had been working on translations of several works from Russian into Japanese, including those written by Ivan Turgenev and Nikolai Gogol. However, he was unable to convey effectively their essence using one of the four classical forms of Japanese. Accordingly, he decided to render them into the colloquial but he could not even decide on basic sentence structure because no grammars existed. After the appearance of *The Essence of the Novel* (*Shōsetsu shinzui*) by Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), Futabatei initiated a friendship with the literary critic and author that lasted for many decades. Tsubouchi suggested that Futabatei construct a new style based on the performances of San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900), a famous *yose* performer, (*yose* is best described as the Japanese version of vaudeville) who allowed his stories to be transcribed. Futabatei then wrote *The Floating Cloud* (*Ukigumo*) in this form. While the mystery of the *genbun'itchi* style (unity of the written and spoken style) was not yet fully solved, Futabatei had made an important first step and had produced what many scholars refer to as Japan's first modern novel.

**Yamada Bimyo (1868-1910)**. Around the same time, another author working independently from Tsubouchi and Futabatei began to experiment with the colloquial style, Yamada Bimyō. Bimyō also had been influenced by the introduction of Western novels into Japan and was especially fond of reading the English language works of Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400). He admired Chaucer for producing quality works of fiction in the vernacular during the 14th century, a time when Latin was the written language of the educated class. Bimyō never finished school, which perhaps contributed to his willingness to experiment to such an extent with the colloquial form. Nonetheless, Bimyō was a prolific author and vocal advocate of language reform.

**Colloquial Style.** Bimyō published several novels, but was never to attain the literary status of Futabatei. In most of his efforts, he was a shameless promoter of the colloquial style and perhaps had gone too far in the eyes of many of his collogues. He was even one of the first to use Western-style punctuation such as the comma, period, question mark and exclamation point. While Bimyō seemed to have had a command of the mechanics of the colloquial style, he was not as polished as Futabatei when it came to character development and plot sophistication. Bimyō also wrote in a number of different styles, including *gabuntai*, which has led many scholars to question his loyalty to the *genbun'itchi* style.

**Genbun 'itchi Style ( Modern Style)** Among scholars of the Japanese language, there is still much discussion about who created the *genbun'itchi* form—or even if there was an identifiable form called *genbun'itchi* in the middle Meiji years. Both Futabatei and Bimyō wrote later in their lives that the style of *Ukigumo* and the style of language used after the publication of Bimyō's *A Song from an Organ Melody* (*Fūkin shirabe no hitofushi*, 1887) was *genbun'itchi*. Bimyō himself credited Futabatei with the creation of the *genbun'itchi* style. Nonetheless, after the publication of Futabatei's and Bimyō's works, over thirty authors were known to be using the *genbun'itchi* style, including, for a time, such literary luminaries as Mori Ōgai (1862-1922).

**The *Kokugaku*.** In the decade or so after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, intellectuals, government officials, philosophers, journalists and the like began a period of great experimentation. They looked around the world for a philosophical and ideological framework to replace the Chinese Confucian system they believed had been superseded. Men such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), Mori Arinori (1847-1889) and Nishi Amane (1829-1897) and many, many others were active in various learned societies, published numerous articles, made speeches and debated before many different groups as public intellectuals. This was known as the "Civilization and Enlightenment" movement and though relatively short lived, was very influential but precipitated a cultural backlash. By the 1880s, many Japanese had had enough of the endless embrace of foreign ideas and believed that the period of experimentation had stripped Japanese culture of its essential nature. During this same period, a group of philosophers and intellectuals began to look backward to Japan's ancient past and to the writings of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801). Motoori studied works such as the *Kojiki* (8th century) and the *Man'yōshū* (759CE). Put succinctly, adherents of Motoori and the *kokugaku* came to believe that Japan and Japanese culture was the purest expression of East Asian culture. This is often described as a nativist ideology. For them, China had gotten it wrong and had strayed from the right and true path.

Many of the leaders of the Meiji Restoration had been heavily influenced by *kokugaku* ideology during the 1840s and 1850s and had temporarily strayed from its central tenants in the first decade or so of the Meiji period. However, as Japan moved into the 1880s, this ideology became ascendant. By the turn of the 20th century, it was the ideology which defined virtually all of the second series of reforms. The cult of the emperor, the state support of Shintō, the Imperial Rescript of Education, the development of *kokugo* (national language) and many other initiatives all reflect this perspective. This remained the central ideology of Japan until 1945.

**Readings**

Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period*, (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2006).