

**Editor's Note:** Please see the online supplement of this issue for classroom discussion questions and a complete bibliography.

# Visions of the Sea in Early Japanese Literature

By Fay Beauchamp

The sea has exerted a profound effect on virtually all Japanese culture including its literature. The six vignettes that follow are sketches drawn from a variety of texts and sources. Hopefully, they offer instructors and students some sense of the multileveled and diverse historical, political, mythical, and aesthetic impact of the ocean on people from long ago who visited and lived in the archipelago. The historical chronicles also include myths, poetry, and intense feelings. Early Japanese records imagined kingdoms under the sea; for example, the eighth-century Japanese chronicle *Nihon Shoki* tells the story of a fisherman who visits an underwater palace and marries the sea god's daughter.<sup>1</sup> In *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu (973–ca. 1014 or 1025) alludes to the story of a sea dragon king who wants a beautiful son-in-law. The historical narrative *The Tale of the Heike* evolved over 200 years with imagination enhancing fact and ending with a dream of the dead reunited in a kingdom under the sea. In these myths, there is an allure of the sea but also the inevitability of death.

## Vignette #1: From a Chinese Point of View

Before travelers from the Korean peninsula brought Buddhism and writing to Japan ca. 538 CE, the *Chinese History of the Kingdom of Wei*, ca. 297 CE, described the people of “Wa” who dwelt

*In the middle of the ocean on the mountainous islands southeast of [the prefecture of] Tai-fang. They originally comprised more than one hundred communities. During the Han dynasty, [Wa] envoys appeared at the court; today, thirty of their communities maintain intercourse with us through envoys and scribes.*<sup>2</sup>

The editors of the useful *Sources of Japanese Tradition* translate “Wa” as Japan, with one name implying cultural unity, yet this remarkable quotation indicates that the seafarers represented multiple communities that maintained independent relationships with the Chinese court. It is a rare glimpse of Japan before 550 CE.

Describing ritual and taboo among the Japanese sailors, the Chinese record conveys the perils of the sea voyage:

*When they go on voyages across the sea to visit China they always select a man who does not comb his hair, does not rid himself of fleas, lets his clothing get as dirty as it will, does not eat meat, and does not lie with women. This man behaves like a mourner and is known as the “mourning keeper.” When the voyage meets with good fortune, they all lavish on him slaves and other valuables. In case there is disease or mishap they kill him, saying that he was not scrupulous in observing the taboos.*<sup>3</sup>

Only if the voyage was long and difficult would it have been necessary to have such a “mourning keeper,” and one suspects by the time the boats landed, there were many who mourned for those lost at sea.

Historian Wang Zhenping explains the risks of the two routes. The more cautious route either went from Kyūshū past the Tsushima Islands to a Korean kingdom or hugged the Korean coasts to China if Korea was stable and Koreans cooperative. Monsoons dominated the second route, directly across the East China Sea for a distance of 528 miles from Nagasaki to the mouth of the Yangzi. In the eighth century CE, one-third or one-fourth of the ships foundered. Ships were flat-bottomed with no keel; the hulls, caulked with “water weed,” often broke apart in wind and high seas.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even when Japanese used a rudder rather than a keel or waited for the direction of the winds to change, sailors faced a treacherous obstacle in the sea between Japan and China.

## Vignette #2: A View From Japanese Officials

Between 630 and 894, Japanese courts sent nineteen official missions with envoys to China; fourteen survived and returned after one or two years. With each mission typically comprising four ships, which could carry up to 150 people, these returning missions significantly impacted Japanese economic, cultural, and religious life.

The dangers of China travel are illustrated in a first-person account by a councilor attached to the Japanese envoy. Chinese government officials appeared to have strict control over travelers, so a one-month sea voyage turned into a nine-month wait for the Japanese group to be received by the Chinese court in the capital, Chang'an:

*Last year (777 CE) on 6:24, our four vessels set sail across the seas bound for China. We petitioned the regional governor, Chen Shaoyou, and were granted permission for 65 of our number to enter the capital. . . . We arrived at Chang'an . . . [and] had an audience with the Tang Emperor on 3:24 (778 CE). . . [Going home] on 9:3, we set sail from the mouth of the Yangzi. We stopped . . . in Suzhou to await the winds . . .*

*On 11:5, with favorable winds behind us, Ship No. 1 and Ship No. 2 set sail together on the voyage home. While in the midst of the sea . . . the winds began to blow violently and the ocean waves became large. The sides and planks of the ship were torn and the vessel filled with sea water. The deck came apart and washed away. People and supplies floated about in the sea, and neither food nor drinking water was saved. [The Japanese Vice-Envoy and thirty-eight Japanese drowned along with the Chinese envoy and twenty-five Chinese.] I alone managed to make my way to the railing at the back corner of the stern where I surveyed my surroundings and awaited the end. The mast fell to the bottom of the ship. The vessel then broke into two sections and drifted separately toward parts unknown. More than 40 people piled upon a part of the stern measuring only about three meters on all four sides as they clung for dear life. After a mooring line was cut and the rudder lost, this part of the vessel floated a little higher in the water.*

*The survivors shed their clothing and sat upon the top of the broken vessel in the nude. The survivors experienced six days without food or water, and then on the 13th, at approximately 10:00 p.m., the broken part of the vessel drifted ashore at Nishinonakashima . . . By the mercy of Heaven, I was granted a second chance at life. I was fortunate indeed!*<sup>5</sup>

The precise report, which let the Japanese government know exactly what happened to the ship, also allows the reader to sympathize with the naked, starving, and thankful narrator.

As well as prose accounts, these missions to China gave rise to poetic exaltations of a homeland “of the imperial kami.” In comparison to the Chinese third-century chronicle that described the flea-bitten “mourner,” the excerpt below offers familiar markers of Japanese proud identity such as the Emperor (“Mikado”), the land of the rising sun (“High-

Radiant Sun”), and the area near Nara called “Yamato.” An eighth-century minor Japanese scribe writes to a departing ambassador:

*The Mikado of the High-Radiant Sun, divine,  
Out of fond affection,  
Has chosen you, a scion of a minister's house.  
You have received his solemn command,  
And to the far off Land of China  
You will be sent, and you will go.  
The kami who dwell by the shores and in the deep  
Of the expanse that is their domain—  
The great exalted kami—  
Will guide you at the prow,  
The great exalted kami of heaven and earth  
And the Spirit of the Great Land of Yamato  
Will wing about the heavens and scan the expanse  
From distant celestial heights.  
When you return, your duties done,  
The great exalted kami shall, again,  
Lay their hands on the prow  
And speed you along a course,  
Straight and direct as an ink line,  
From the cape of Mitsu, where your ship will moor.  
Fare well, let there be no mischance  
Come back quickly.<sup>6</sup>*



Murasaki also based Genji on the courtier Yukihiro (d. 893) exiled to Suma (woodblock print, 1887). Source: ookaboo.com.

One can perceive national pride in the distinction between the land of China where “you will be sent” and the land of Japan where one yearns for quick return.

### Vignette #3: A View of Chinese and Korean Visitors to Japan

In the seventh and eighth centuries, there were also large delegations from China and Korea to Japan. Historian Bruce Batten reports the arrival of five separate Chinese governmental “embassies” who reached Japan between 664 and 671.<sup>7</sup> After Japanese troops were fighting in Korea, on the side of Paekche against Silla and Tang Chinese forces, the Chinese won. In 671, a group of 600 Chinese arrived in Japan, returning 1,400 Japanese prisoners of war. While the Chinese representatives were ostensibly peaceful, it is not surprising that Japan responded to the show of force with a system of border guards, signal fires, and coastal fortresses.

A complex mixture of motivation lies behind these Chinese and Korean delegations to Japan. They may have been intended to expand the empire with enforced tribute or simply to trade goods. In exchange for Japanese silk fabric, those from the Korean kingdom of Silla brought polished mirrors, iron, and raw goods that were used for fragrances, cosmetics, and medicines. Batten, however, questions a view that trade was the driving factor and suggests that delegations also had religious motivations. Koreans were drawn to Nara soon after the installation of the great Buddha of Tōdaiji in 752.

In his study of the Tsukushi Lodge in Kyūshū, in the area of Japan nearest Korea, Batten describes reasons for confining foreign visitors in many such facilities as early as the eighth century. The 752 Korean delegation included 700 envoys who were confined for months before about half were allowed to travel to the capital. Like the 600 Chinese who arrived in 671, the Korean group was large enough to threaten an emperor. Segregating foreigners also protected against infectious disease and prevented alliances with local leaders. Governmental patrols sent from Nara or Kyoto and coastal fortifications ensured that no unofficial foreigners wandered around Japan. Even though seventh- and eighth-century Japanese welcomed goods and ideas about religions, writing, and political systems from

China and Korea, the inland capital cities on the main island of Honshū were well-protected from incursions against the sea.

### Vignette #4: The 804 Mission of and Two Sugawara Poets

Missions allowed Buddhists to travel to China and remain for many years, with the expectation of returning to Japan with the results of their study. In 804, Kūkai sailed to China, taking thirty-four days and unexpectedly ending in Fujian, where his knowledge of written Chinese helped the embassy win needed favor to get to Chang’an, the Tang dynasty capital. After his famous studies with his Buddhist “master,” Kūkai returned in 806 to establish a Shingon Buddhist temple complex on Mt. Kōya. On the same mission, the Buddhist monk Saichō sailed on a different ship, sent by Emperor Kammu in an effort to gain prestige for the imperial government. Saichō returned within a year and created a new Tendai Buddhist center on Mt. Hiei.

Historian Robert Borgen’s *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* describes literature stemming from the 804 voyage. A poem recited by Emperor Kammu to the departing Japanese ambassador is one of the few surviving distinctly Japanese five-line *waka* from the early Heian period. It reads:

*This cup of wine / Is not large. / But it is wine / In prayer for / Your safe return.*

The chronicles continue:

*[The Ambassador’s] tears fell like rain and there was not one among the assembled nobles who did not weep.<sup>8</sup>*

This small scene evokes both the honor and the risk faced by those chosen to go to China. Moreover, Borgen includes the scene because Sugawara no Kiyokimi, a rising official already recognized for his scholarship in Chinese literature, accompanied the ambassador. One of Kiyokimi’s poems became well-known in Japan for its Chinese word play. It describes a snowstorm in China on the way to Chang’an:

*Clouds and mist have not yet departed from the old year / But plums and willows unexpectedly encounter the spring. / Alas, the jewel dust / Comes and soaks the traveler’s handkerchief.<sup>9</sup>*

Snow is compared to falling plum blossoms and jade dust before melting to tears. Despite his own accomplishments, Sugawara no Kiyokimi is primar-





Atsumori turns to face Kumagai at Ichi-no-Tani, depicted by Chikanobu (1838-1912). Source: [fujiarts.com](http://fujiarts.com).

ily remembered because he had a much more famous grandson: Sugawara no Michizane (845–903).

Sugawara Michizane was a formidable courtier, scholar, and poet whose writings Murasaki Shikibu frequently quoted. Ironically, almost a hundred years after the 804 mission that brought his grandfather to China, it was Sugawara no Michizane who brought the China missions to an end. In 894, Michizane wrote a formal request, which includes the following eloquent words again emphasizing the perils of travel:

*When removed from their native lands, even the horses of the north and the birds of the south long for their homes. Is this not all the more true of men? Investigating records from the past, we have observed that some of the men sent to China have lost their lives at sea and others have been killed by pirates.<sup>10</sup>*

When Japan ended the missions, trade did not end, but literary accounts of travel to China or Korea greatly diminished.

Michizane is of great interest given the topic of this essay, because he bitterly minded being exiled down south along a Kyūshū shore. Forced to stay at Dazaifu near the Tsukushi Lodge where Koreans and Chinese were confined, Michizane wrote:

*This small thatched hut,  
It will suffice as a temporary dwelling,  
Surely here I will meet my end.  
Although my spirit may long for home,  
My bones will be buried in exile.<sup>11</sup>*

Murasaki Shikibu demonstrates an awareness of tales told after Michizane's death, which describe a thunder god striking down those who falsely accused Michizane of treasonous intent. Michizane became honored at many Shinto Tenjin shrines, with the most famous shrines on Kyūshū, and the Kitano Shrine in Kyoto, founded in 947. Like his grandfather, Michizane knew Chinese poetry well. He set an example in copying the style and content of the Chinese poet Bai Juyi's poems of exile, such as "The Song of the Lute." Murasaki Shikibu has Genji refer to "Song of the Lute" while in exile in Akashi—not by coincidence by the side of the dark blue sea.

#### Vignette #5: Prince Genji at Suma and Akashi

The Akashi chapter of *The Tale of Genji* begins with the crash of thunder and incessant rain of a typhoon so extensive—from the shores of Suma and

Akashi to Kyoto—as to appear supernatural. The young love of Genji's life, the character Murasaki, writes of the "terrifying storm" she experiences in Kyoto and sends a poem to Genji exiled first in Suma:

*How the wind must blow, where you are, across the shore when the thought of you / sends such never-ending waves to break on my moistened sleeves.<sup>12</sup>*

Sugawara no Kiyokimi (ca. 804) beforehand had suggested the tears of grief in the melting of snow on a handkerchief. Here the tumult of a young woman's grief is conveyed when wind and rain obliterate the line between sea and shore; the waves of the sea become waves of emotion. Later, this trope of rain/waves/tears becomes such a cliché, one might think Japanese characters were in frequent states of clinical depression.

The Akashi chapter (written ca. 1010) generally parallels Sugawara Michizane's exile of a hundred years before. According to Japanese literature scholar Royall Tyler, Genji's father, the Emperor, was based on the real Emperor Daigo, who exiled Michizane. While Emperor Daigo may not have felt guilty about this act, the fictional Emperor and son seem to suffer from "karmic retribution." Unlike Michizane, the fictional Genji, was saved from exile. The patron of seafarers, Sumiyoshi, protects Genji, who writes a poem,

*Had I not enjoyed divine aid from those great gods who live in the sea,  
/ I would now be wandering the vastness of the ocean.<sup>13</sup>*

As the "mourning keeper" in the third-century Chinese chronicle followed rituals and taboos for protection from the sea, the Akashi chapter shows exile and terror along the shore serving as a catalyst for divine aid.

Sea and poetry together have divine power. In response to eloquent prayers, the god Sumiyoshi obligingly blows the little boat of another exiled aristocrat along the shore to Suma to whisk Genji away to Akashi. On that gentler shore, Genji exchanges poems and *koto* melodies with the exiled aristocrat's daughter. Eventually, everyone exiled—Genji and the Akashi father and daughter—return to Kyoto. When Genji and the Akashi's daughter have a child, Genji gives thanks at the Sumiyoshi Shrine.<sup>14</sup> Tyler suggests in a footnote that Sumiyoshi, god of seafarers and poetry, protects the Japanese imperial line, since the union of Genji and the Akashi daughter produces a succession of emperors. According to Tyler's interpretation, Genji has married the sea dragon's daughter.<sup>15</sup>

Vignette #6: *Tales of the Heike by the Sea*

While *The Tale of Genji* reflects the peace of the Heian period (794–1185), *The Tale of the Heike* tells how two interrelated military clans brought the Heian Period to an end. The Heike (Taira) and the Genji (Minamoto) turned against one another and demolished themselves, as well as much of Kyoto and Nara. If *The Tale of Genji* is brilliant fiction inspired by earlier lives and literature, *The Tale of the Heike* is romanticized history so brilliantly told it reads like fiction. The authorship of *The Tale of the Heike* is the result of many storytellers; a reading text survives from 1309–1310, as does a 1371 performance text dictated by a blind storyteller. The main protagonists are well-documented historical figures; for example, outside Kyoto at Ohara, one can visit the last home of Kenreimon, an empress whose death is described in the final pages.

Coincidentally, the disastrous Battle of Ichi-no-Tani (1184) occurred on the Suma shore almost 200 years after Murasaki Shikibu exiled her fictional Genji at Suma before he left for nearby Akashi. The battle occurs after the families of the once-powerful Heike were forced to leave Kyoto and retreated, hoping to find protection from their fleet. Perhaps the most famous story of Ichi-no-Tani takes place in the surf, where the Heike/Taira young warrior is riding his white horse into the sea to escape by boat but turns around to face the warrior Kumagai's challenge. *The Tale of the Heike* creates the poignancy of this encounter:

*The pair fell. Kumagai pinned the head to the ground and, to take it, tore off the helmet. He beheld a youth in his sixteenth or seventeenth year, his face lightly powdered, his teeth blackened, and about the same age as Kumagai's son Kojirō. He was very pretty, too. Kumagai could not bring himself to begin.*

But as Kumagai sees other warriors on his own side come riding up along the beach, "In tears, he took the head after all."<sup>16</sup>

At the end of *The Tale of the Heike*, the surviving Empress Kenreimon recounts how the Heike fled:

*our own capital, a burned-out ruin, / and from place to place that to us were once only names —/Suma to Akashi, along the shore —/we wandered absorbed in our own misery . . . /Shore by stretch of shore, island by island, /we saw places famed in song and story /but could never forget our home."<sup>17</sup>*

It is eerie reading these lines to realize that Kenreimon is referring to the Suma and Akashi chapters in *The Tale of Genji*, and that while a fictional Genji earlier referred to historical exiles before him, now a historical person compares her life to fiction. The most poignant scene of *The Tale of the Heike* occurs during the last sea battle of Dan-no-ura (1185), when Kenreimon's mother holds her grandson, the child Emperor who is about to be captured and killed. The grandmother says:

*Down there, far beneath the waves, /another capital awaits us— /and plunged into the fathomless deep. /Alas! The spring winds of transience / in one brief instant swept away /the beauty of this lovely blossom; / the billows of a heartless fate /swallowed His Sovereign Majesty . . . As sad a tale as any ever told."<sup>18</sup>*

The episode is retold by Kenreimon, who survives but has lost all her family. She recounts a dream:

*I was somewhere more beautiful than the palace of old. My son, the former emperor, was there, and with him all the noble gentlemen of our house, all in magnificently solemn array. I had not seen the like since we fled the capital, and I asked where I was. A figure I took to be [my mother] replied: 'This is the Dragon Palace.' 'Everything is so beautiful,' I said. 'Is there no suffering here?'<sup>19</sup>*

Kenreimon and her mother or the storytellers of *Heike* give comfort in evoking the myth of the sea dragon's palace. But while Genji was protected by the gods of the sea, it seems clear in *Heike* that only in death or story do the great, beautiful palaces and the loved ones there still exist.

## Conclusion

The first four vignettes reflect the writing of governmental literate elites. Both Chinese and Japanese chronicles tracked voyages and delegations to each other's capital cities; both countries made difficulties for any undocumented traveler washed up upon the shore. The travels were so fully reported, history sometimes reads like adventure stories. In East Asia 600–1085, government courtiers, influenced by Confucian ideology, studied and wrote poetry, and the historical records reflect that, too.

By the time of *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*, great storytellers emerged, one a court woman confined to palaces but encouraged to write and the others itinerant storytellers who often were blind. Neither Murasaki nor the creators of the 1371 *Heike* version may ever have viewed the sea. They drew on a multitude of sources. Their visions of the sea, including the sea dragon's palace, are imaginative, and draw, perhaps, on their own knowledge of love, sorrow, happiness, and regret. ■

## NOTES

1. For a full discussion of this motif, see "Genji and the Luck of the Sea," *The Disaster of the Third Princess: Essays on The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (Cambridge: ANU Press, 2009), 131–156.
2. Wm Theodore de Bary, Donald Keene, George Tanabe, and Paul Varley, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, From Earliest Times to 1600*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 6.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. Wang Zhenping, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period* (Honolulu: Association of Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 78.
5. "Japanese Missions to Tang China, Seventh–Ninth Centuries," trans. Doug Fuqua. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/k7ytjoe>.
6. Zhenping, 69–70.
7. Bruce L. Batten, *Gateway to Japan: Hakata in War and Peace, 500-1300* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 25.
8. Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asia Monographs, 1987), 33.
9. *Ibid.*, 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 242.
11. *Ibid.*, 300.
12. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, vol. 1, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 257.
13. *Ibid.*, 259.
14. The author thanks Professor Akiko Sato, who took her in 2013 to Akashi, to Suma (now within Kobe) and to the Sumiyoshi Shrine in present-day Osaka.
15. Tyler, 258.
16. *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Viking, 2012), 505.
17. *Ibid.*, 701.
18. *Ibid.*, 610–611.
19. *Ibid.*, 704.

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