In Court: How was it living in court?

Ramon Garcia

Japanese 309: Japanese Literature in Translation

Dr. Takahashi

December 14, 2015

When the court was very prominent in Japan there are many stories on how the people lived and how people thought they lived. A few stories captured the essence of living in the court and they show what kind of system they had when living there. The first is the Tale of Genji, this is an all important novel by Murasaki Shikibu. Second is Pillow Book by Sei Shōnagon, this one is very important since she spoke of all of what happened in court by making lists. Next is Murasaki Shikibu Diary, this is a diary specifically about Murasaki who wrote the Tale of Genji while in court so she had a very good insight of what it means to live in court. Finally, is Tale of Ise, a collection of different stories. This one is important because it has a lot of poetry, a key method of communication that was used in those times.

Tale of Genji was really a first of its kind in many different things. But the historical value that it holds and the stories that it tells are the real reason why this book is so popular to this day. Although fictional in the manner of how court life really is. It still has some key points that it tells how it was to life in court. In class we watch and read The Tale of Genji so there are differences, but the content is still pretty similar in terms of what it means to live in court. Despite the novel being fictional there is still a lot that we can learn from The Tale of Genji about how living in court was. In the movie once Genji is older he decides to have palace built, where he will now live. He has different sections and different parts where all of his wives will live. This shows that having multiple wives was acceptable at the time and no one really cared about it unlike today, where it is not really a good idea to have multiple wives, let alone have them all live together in the same place. Another thing that we see in Tale of Genji is that Genji kidnapped one of the woman that would eventually become one of his wives. This was apparently okay with the father and was he did not really fight it because Geji was of high social status that he thought that this was good for his daughter. Unlike now, this would be completely unacceptable. What Genji did was really to mold her into an ideal wife. According to him he did not really want to marry her, but in the end he did because he did mold her into an ideal woman for him. Another aspect that Genji shows is being jealous. As told by the book he is an extremely handsome man that no woman can resist. So Genji is really used to getting what he wants. With one of the woman that he is trying to woo, he has to be patient because she does not really like Genji, something that is new to him. At a later point he tries to sneak into her room to try and seduce her. This fails and Genji tries again at a later date. In this attempt Genji ends up failing and ends up sleeping with her brother. This is one of the few examples in literature that openly have homosexuality. At the very end Genji does not get this woman to be his. She ends up becoming a nun once her husband dies. This also shows one of the options that happens when a woman becomes a widow. She can remarry, become a nun, or serve in court and she chose to become a nun. All of these examples show how some of the men were when it came to trying to seduce woman. In most of his attempts he succeeded because of how handsome he was said to be. Another important aspect of court life that is shown is Genji getting banished from court for something that he did. Getting banished from court is a very important part of Genji’s life in my opinion and he is pretty much all by himself when he is there. In most cases getting banned from court means that you can never come back and you are most likely not allowed to take another position in court. This is seen to be untrue for Genji, he manages to get back into court by saying that he would mentor or take care of one of the younger princes in the court. The Tale of Genji really has a lot to offer in terms of that it means to live in court. From managing multiple lovers, to being banished from court and coming back, as well as him getting rejected, despite how handsome the book made him out to be.

The Pillow Book by Sei Shōnagon is also a work of fiction that follows how it is living court according to Shōnagon. Shōnagon lived in court so everything that she wrote, it is because it was something that she saw there. She makes different kinds of lists of what the the people like or dislike, she made list of unsuitable things, of embarrassing things, rare things, and many other kinds of observations. These observations are extremely helpful because they give an insight of what she thought is acceptable while living in court. According to the lecture women of high social status had plenty of leisure time to spend reading and writing, flirting and gossiping. This is how she managed to write and have all these insights, since she was a woman in high position. Among those there are also something that would not be considered to be sexist and would not be acceptable. However, at the time, these were considered to be acceptable and they were things that Shōnagon thought were important. In one list, Things that should be short, she writes a speech of a young girl. This would be considered unacceptable now. For the most part there are a lot of suggestions that Shōnagon makes that are more like “do not do” rather than just advice. For example, she gives advice on what to do when leaving a secret lover, she suggest that you do not sneeze on people and more or less these are also on basic manners.

The next is Murasaki Shibuku Diary. This is a sort of like the Pillow Book, but it is different since it has observations and lifestyle of court life.  There is also more of a historical value to it than the Pillow Book. There is a lot on court life here that Shibuku describes, the first is that although things seem to be a luxury living in court, that only applies to men. Shibuku expresses discomfort living in court. She also talks about how it feels to be living in court. She calls most men as drunks since that is what she sees when they talk to her. Shibuku also says that because of this many of these stories got out to the public, became scandals and it became a bad situation for both of them. She also wrote that they women were well hidden from the general public and had a private room to themselves, however that completely change when the men where there. The men would just barge into the woman room with no warning whatsoever. Shibuku also describes the living conditions that they had when living in court. She says that they were really uncomfortable in thin wood mats. As well as the house that they were living in was very cold and windy during the winter. Also described is how they had to wear multiple layers of clothing to keep warm, especially in the winter months. A second aspect of her Diary that also is a key part of court life is how she, as a lady in waiting, was like. Since she was a lady in waiting, she was by herself most of the time. She did not really do anything other than write. Because of this she suffered from loneliness. Shibuku also had concerns with how she was aging.  This is seen in her diary by showing concerns and comparing herself to other woman.

Tale of Ise is a collection of stories, however it is a very important collection because it describes how some people in court communicated secretly. Since it is a collection of stories there is no specific author or who exactly the story talks about isn’t well known. The method was used to communicate was with poems. With what we read in class it follows Ariwara no Narihira and his journey that he takes and all of the woman that he has met in his travels and the poems that he used to woo them. At first glance one may think that this is just about one woman, but no, rereading this couple of times one sees that this is about multiple woman. This is exactly how it was to be a man in court. Since the men needed to have sons in order to keep their power in court they would attempt of sleep as many women as possible in order to keep a position in court. The poems are actually really good and it shows how what men are willing to do in order to maintain their power.

All of these tales help us see now in the modern day to see how life in court was. We see someone with multiple partners managing to have them all under the same roof, something that would be impossible now. Aside from this we also see the complications of coming into court, being kicked out, and coming back by having someone in court to help you. Whether these events really occurred in real life court is would be really unknown, since everything tends to be more secretive. In the Pillow book we see things Shōnagon describe what she saw in court and what she found to be favorable. In my opinion this is a well needed piece of work since seeing what Shōnagon though was favorable showed how people acted in court and what she thought could be fixed. Likewise Murasaki Shibuku showed us with her diary the discomfort that she had while living in court. Since most stories always pay attention to the point of view from men, this is an important work to consider since it also shows how woman had to live while in court. Tale of Ise shows is a really fun and different method of communication, that method being writing in poems. It is important to see how people communicated in order to get what they want and exchanging poems was a extremely important to seduce a woman. Overall these stories show how living in court was. Some made it seem like it was a good thing, and in others it made it seem like it was the absolute worst thing ever. In my opinion, you really have to look at both sides to see if living in court was really a good thing.