THE HIDDEN SUN: WOMEN OF MODERN JAPAN

Dorothy Robins-Mowry
with a Foreword by
Edwin O. Reischauer

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THE HIDDEN SUN

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The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan

Dorothy Robins-Mowry
with a Foreword by Edwin O. Reischauer

Ever since Japan and the West discovered one another, Western observers have extolled the surface virtues of Japanese women but attended very little to what they are really like. In this new, balanced view of the role of Japanese women in their country's swiftly changing society, Dr. Robins-Mowry destroys the Western stereotype of the shy, perhaps slightly coquettish, doll-like figure and replaces it with a sober, realistic portrait of a woman whose attitudes and activities influence the policies and trends of modern Japan, both domestically and internationally. She analyzes as well the extensive and often unrecognized constraints tradition places on women's performance in Japan's highly industrialized democracy, revealing uniquely Japanese customs and interrelationships in all facets of the nation's culture and society. The result is a penetrating overview of the changes in the whole of Japanese society since World War II—changes in which women have been catalysts, not bystanders.

The central part of the book examines the emergence of the postwar Japanese woman and her impact on her country's affairs, set against the background of critical historical and traditional factors. It is an intimate portrayal of the way the Japanese woman lives, the way she relates to her family and her work, how she sees herself within Japan's social and political contexts, and how she views the contribution she makes or can make to Japan's prosperity in general. Dr. Robins-Mowry writes with insight, sympathy, and understanding derived from years of immersion in the complex social, economic, and political life of Japan and its women. She illustrates her narrative with the comments of scores of Japanese women from all walks of life, culled from hundreds of interviews. A broad spectrum is represented—from well-known figures like Ichikawa Fusae and Ogata Sadako to leaders of rural cooperatives and environmental groups to women concentrating on raising their families.

A foreign service officer in the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) since 1963, Dr. Robins-Mowry has served overseas in Japan and Iran. From 1963 to 1971 she was chief of educational exchanges, cultural programs officer, and women's activities officer in the U.S. Information Service in Tokyo. She currently holds the position of policy officer in USIA for the Office of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. In 1980 and 1981 Dr. Robins-Mowry was visiting professor of political science at the University of Maryland, teaching courses on women and politics.

In the beginning, woman was really the sun.
She was a true person.
Now woman is the moon.
She depends on others for her life
And reflects the light of others.
She is sickly as a wan, blue-white moon.

We, the completely hidden sun, must now restore ourselves.
"We must reveal the hidden sun—our concealed genius."
This is our constant cry and the inspiration of our
unified purpose.
The climax of this cry, this thirst, this desire will
impel the genius in ourselves to shine forth.

—Proclamation of Emancipation, *Bluestocking Journal (Seitō)*, 1911

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To the Many Japanese Women
Whose Friendship Inspired This Book
and Made It Possible

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Foreword

Very shortly after I went to Japan as the U.S. Ambassador in April 1961, my wife, Haru, and I discovered that there was a great demand on the part of Japanese women for meetings with her to discuss Japanese-American relations and, still more, the roles and life of women in the United States and Japan. Soon she found herself with a crushing load of work of this sort to add to her already heavy burdens as an ambassador's wife. It became clear that there was a very real need for a women's activities officer in the United States Information Service branch of the embassy, and we started a search for the right person. The wheels of government, however, move slowly, and it was not until October 1963 that Dr. Dorothy Robins-Mowry, who was simply Dr. Dorothy Robins at the time, arrived in Japan.

A more happy choice could not have been found. Dr. Robins-Mowry had already established herself in the fields of women's work and international relations, and during her eight years in Japan she became a thorough expert on women's affairs there. Through her enthusiastic enterprise, unflagging energy, and warm personality, she established deep and lasting contacts with the women leaders of Japan. She came to know their work and the problems of Japanese women as well as any foreigner ever has. She has continued her interest in Japan and her contacts with the women since her departure, devoting two further years to research on this book. The result is an extraordinarily thorough account, told largely through the activities and words of the Japanese women leaders themselves.

The subject of women in Japan has always been one of the most baffling to foreign observers. The surface evidence seems to point in very contradictory directions. The flirtatious, beautiful *geisha* has been one cliché for Japanese women, the browbeaten *hausfrau* drudge another. The neat, cute office girl has contrasted with the dreary, exploited female factory worker. The exacting mother—the famous *kyōiku mama,* or "education mama"—and the tight-fisted mistress of the family finances

form still another picture. Recently we have seen the rise of rebellious women authors and spectacular feminine figures in the world of the arts. Japanese women seem to combine meekness and ironlike strength, docility and domestic dominance, gentle beauty and daring action. It is not a picture that easily blends into a comprehensible whole.

Variations are naturally to be found in all large groupings of people, but Japanese women seem to show greater contrasts than most. Perhaps it is the result of the mixing of clashing heritages. There is reason to believe that Japan has an ancient underlying matriarchal background, which has survived in aspects of its culture all the way through history. At the same time, the main cultural heritage of Japan became more than a thousand years ago the strongly patriarchal tradition of Confucian China, and this was reinforced by the male dominance of a feudal age in which military prowess was all-important. Together these forces produced the extreme male chauvinism that at least superficially characterized the Japan of the nineteenth century. But then came the more liberalizing concepts of the nineteenth-century West, which called for a more equal role for women. These were followed by the still more liberating views of the twentieth-century West. The resulting conflict of cultural influences could well account for the confusing mixture of impressions that the outside world has of Japanese women.

Dr. Robins-Mowry has not tried to analyze all these tangled threads of the lives of women in Japan or explore in depth the attitudes and emotions of the various categories of Japanese women over time or even in the present age. She focuses on the central story of the conscious effort of women leaders in the development of a more coherent and self-respecting role for women in modern Japan from the 1870s until the 1980s. She has given us our most complete account of the activities of a remarkable group of women who became aware of the possible roles of women in society and started movements that have grown to large proportions, deeply affecting the society, economy, and also the politics of contemporary Japan. It is a story of great significance, not only for Japan but for other countries going through some of the same changes. It is also a fascinating account, for many of the women leaders have been truly extraordinary persons, and the spread of their movement from a few individuals to mass organizations that helped shape society and politics is a crucial aspect of the story of our times. Much more will be written about the perplexing place of women in Japanese society, but Dr. Robins-Mowry's book will always serve as a basic introduction to the story of a conscious women's movement in Japan.

Edwin O. Reischauer
University Professor, *Emeritus*
Harvard University

Preface

> *. . . the most wonderful aesthetic products of Japan are not its ivories, nor its bronzes, nor its porcelains, nor its swords, nor any of its marvels in metal or lacquer—but its women.*
>
> —Lafcadio Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation,* 1904[1]

Ever since Japan and the West discovered each other, Western observers have extolled the graces of Japanese women. This fundamental fact I knew when I walked down the gangplank of the *President Cleveland* in the rain and fog in October 1963 to start an assignment as women's activities officer at the U.S. Embassy in Tōkyō. Other qualities of Japanese women were not so apparent. The mist enveloping Yokohama port that morning seemed appropriately symbolic.

Ambassador and Mrs. Edwin O. Reischauer, who had urged that a new program to increase contact and understanding between the women of our two countries be initiated at the embassy, encouraged me in my assignment. My first task was to assume nothing and strive to discover what the Japanese woman was really like and what she wanted of her life and for her family and her society.

For the first year I traveled the reaches of Japan, from Kyūshū to Hokkaidō, asking questions, listening to ideas, and meeting a cross-section of girls in schools and textile mills and women in local, provincial, and national leadership positions in organizations, the professions, the media, and politics. I talked about women with men in decision-making positions. I asked about women's interests and problems to discover areas of mutuality between U.S. and Japanese societies and women's role in them. On the basis of this intercommunication, I started building opportunities of exchange and programs that actively grew for nine years, linking Japanese women not only with U.S. women, but also

with those of other countries, particularly their neighbors in North and Southeast Asia.

In that time and the years since, I welcomed and cherished the Japanese friends I made and delighted in visits with them and their families in their homes and in taking part in their festivities. I also gained perceptions about how Americans and other Westerners tend to view the Japanese, particularly the women. The longer I lived in Japan, the more I became aware that outsiders were prone to regard their roles primarily in simplistic terms. How often when explaining to a visitor what my job was at the embassy came the response, "You are working with the Japanese women? Whatever you do don't change them." What the person really meant was, "Do not shatter illusions"—the "remote aesthetic viewpoint," as one Japanese described it.[2]

Japanese men are equally guilty of limited visions about the distaff members of their society. Their inadequate knowledge points up a serious problem within the society, namely poor communication. Unhappily, such deficiencies compound the problem, for it is the men of Japan who normally have most of the encounters with Westerners.

The stock image of Japanese women was not created overnight. From early Dutch and Portuguese traders to the men of Commodore Perry's Black Ships, from the missionaries and diary-keeping tourists of the Meiji and Taishō eras down to their modern counterparts, from the Occupation-era GI to his contemporary military colleague, Western visitors have admired the modesty and delicacy of Japanese women. Lafcadio Hearn, writing the tribute that opens these pages, reflected more eloquently but no less truthfully the reactions of others.

Only a few have penetrated the surface to become aware of the individual woman's aspirations and personality. There is the inevitable language barrier. More pertinently, Japanese society, traditionally keeping the woman secluded in the inner house, figuratively spun for her a protective cocoon that enhanced her mysterious and romantic aura in the foreigner's imagination. Thus, this wonderment molded the Japanese woman into a doll-like figure—lovely but not quite real. The image of the doll, dressed either as an entertaining courtesan, coquettishly mincing with short steps beneath her colorful parasol, or as a docile wife and mother kneeling on the *tatami* mat floor and serving her family with decorously bowed head, in time hardened into stereotype. The world gently placed this living, breathing woman into the glass box used throughout Japan to encase all treasured kimono-clad and artistically hand-wrought dolls. She was entrapped in the legends of her own perfections—a likeness that harmonized with those other perpetuated symbols of Japan: cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji.

Contemporary mass media present an equally superficial point of view, featuring updated variations on the same themes: the modern bar girl; sex life and the office girl, Japanese style; the feminist movement; and the housewife. International diplomatic dignitaries, businessmen, and tourists, stepping off the plane, are eager to see and meet examples for themselves. Japanese government and business hosts order elaborate, expense-account geisha parties in luxurious settings for their guests. Only rarely is a visitor taken to a Japanese home, where the wife and mother will most likely slip in and out of the room, busy with her obligations of serving the honored guest. As far as most of the world can discern, the Japanese doll is still encased in her glass box.

Japanese women with first-hand experience of the outside world have long recognized their predicament. Some contemporaries of Lafcadio Hearn wrote a pamphlet about themselves for distribution at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, advising that they "are misunderstood to a great extent."[3] In the mid-1930s, an organizational leader, after visiting in North and South America, started an English-language newsletter to correct false impressions and give voice to the Japanese woman because "Japanese women to most of the people abroad are *Geisha* Girls or hostesses in bamboo houses with paper lantern. They must be heard, they must be known that they are real women with flesh and blood who experience joy, sorrow, aspirations and struggles."[4] A few Japanese women, such as Sugimoto Inagaki Etsu, Katō (Ishimoto) Shidzue, Kawai Michi, Mishima Sumie, and Matsuoka Yoko, opened a curtain to the West by writing autobiographies in English.

From time to time Western women who lived and worked with Japanese women have reported on the women's way of life. Alice Mabel Bacon, friend of Tsuda Umeko, was perhaps the first. The rationale for her book in 1891 was her belief that the whole fabric of Japanese social life would be better comprehended when the women and the homes that they made were better known.[5] In 1953, Mary R. Beard, pioneer specialist in the history of women, who helped Japanese women organize after the 1923 earthquake, took Japanese-compiled biographies of Japanese women since Amaterasu Ōmikami and "put them in their times and places where their meanings have their significance as a traditional force of women in history."[6] Others, more recently, have portrayed the historical atmosphere through personality sketches or have taken a functional or single-track view.

Emboldened by the enthusiastic support of my Japanese colleagues, here I attempt to look at Japanese women truly as half of their society. I want others to see them as I came to know them, actively influencing all aspects of Japanese affairs. The historical base is included to show

the continuum of its influence. Without recognition of historical traditional forces, understanding of modern development is at best qualified—only a seeking of a mirror image of Western society rather than an assessment of a traditional society in the process of change.

The section on the contemporary period emphasizes fundamental themes of development: social, economic, political, and—the aspect that has been the most neglected—international. In each, I have tried to illustrate development through the activities and comments of outstanding women, such as Ichikawa Fusae in the feminist and political fields, Oku Mumeo in the economic, and Katō (Ishimoto) Shidzue in the social and international. These women, recognized by Japanese women themselves as leaders and symbols of progress, can serve similarly to foreigners who would look more deeply into the hearts and minds of Japanese women.

Throughout I have tried to let the women speak for themselves—in the early historical periods through their poetry, memoirs, autobiographies, and novels, adding for this century personal remembrances and direct interviews. In my ten years in Japan from 1963 to 1973, working full-time with Japanese women and their organizations, I kept copious notes of the many discussions and conferences in which I took part. I made notations about my interpretation of the whys of Japanese reactions—very important to a larger understanding.

My purpose is to open the glass case guarding the stereotype and lend a hand to help the active, modern woman step forth. As my friend and mentor Ichikawa Fusae enjoined while urging me to undertake this book, "Tell about the Japanese women as you see them, both favorable and unfavorable, but tell their story."

What follows, therefore, is neither a feminist argument nor a plea for the Japanese woman. Japanese women need no such help from outsiders. It is, rather, a broad-brush study of the Japanese woman's attitudes and activities and their effect on herself, her society, and her country's policies. It describes her influence and how she exerts it. It shows her remarkable capacity to pinpoint domestic problems well in advance of national recognition, making her a forecaster of social and economic need and change.

Given a research assignment in the fall of 1971 by the United States Information Agency (USIA), I was able for the next two years to undertake more formal research in the United States and Japan, and carry out systematic, in-depth interviewing with more than one hundred women and men. The interviews, which were conducted in Japanese and/or English and taped, cut across age groups, life-styles, professions, political viewpoints, and geography. To all the interviewees my deep appreciation. They revealed much more of interest than could possibly

be encompassed by just one book. Incidentally, except where used with a Western honorific title, all Japanese names are written with surname first and given name last.

Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation helped support my research. To them, as to USIA, I am most grateful. The Radcliffe Institute for Women made me a research fellow, 1971–1972, providing valuable research resources. Working with me through the research and early writing periods were many Japanese companions, who readily assisted whenever I asked. Especially I would mention Ichikawa Fusae, Sakanishi Shio, and Shiraishi Tsugi, all recently deceased, and also Oshima Kiyoko and Sōma Yukika. Yamamoto Kazuko and Ishii Reiko, daily research and translating-interpreting aides who came to me through these friends, in turn became my friends, and the book, a project of joint interest. Together with fifteen to twenty Japanese colleagues working for the U.S. Embassy and Cultural Centers, they did all the translating and interpreting not otherwise credited. Several people reviewed the manuscript; the comments of Ardath W. Burks were particularly detailed, incisive, and encouraging. Philip M. Nagao of the Japanese Division of the Library of Congress kindly spent many hours helping to find illustrations for the historical portion of the text.

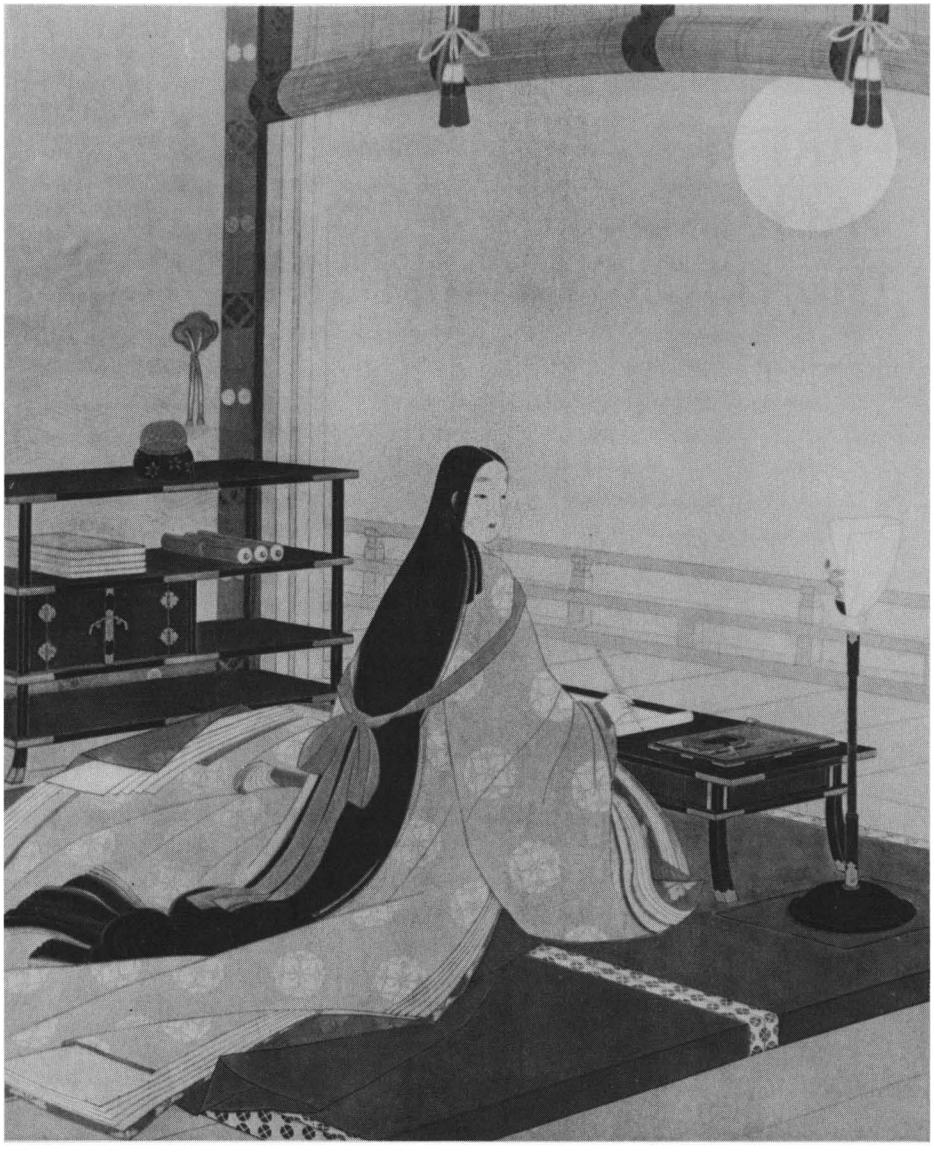
Typists in three countries labored diligently. Especially I thank Murate Hiroko in Japan, Bernice Richards in Iran, and Helen Nakki, Frances Kaspar, and Catherine Mike in the United States. Special thanks go to Carolyn Spatta Karlow for editing and putting the final version into shape.

The manuscript in process is well traveled, having crossed from Japan to the United States for my reassignment there in 1973 and then on to Tehran in 1978 for my reassignment there as cultural attaché. I carried the manuscript with me as one of my most valued belongings as I flew out of Iran in December 1978 when revolutionary turmoil possessed the country.

To Mildred Marcy, my colleague at USIA, who sometimes despaired but never lost faith in the long years of this book, and to my husband, David T. Mowry, who also lived with its making, advising, reading manuscript, and editing, "thank you" is hardly sufficient, but most truly it is the finest phrase there is.

Dorothy Robins-Mowry

PART 1
BACKGROUND:
THE LOOM OF HISTORY



I would like the rest of the world to study Japanese history so that they will understand the background of today's Japanese women. Unlike America, where men and women joined together in founding the country, Japan has been a country of men. The quickest way to discover this is to read Japanese history.

—Community Leader, Fukuoka, Spring 1972

Past and present mingle freely in Japanese daily life.

At no time is this more apparent than during the observances for New Year, the most important holiday of the year. Tolling temple bells ring out at midnight to exorcise the one hundred and eight Buddhist evils. Family members stop routine daily chores to travel the length and breadth of Japan for traditional reunions. In the spirit of the event, modern young women shed their short skirts and workaday uniforms. They revert to the time-honored, gaily flowered kimono, enveloping shrugs, and tinsel hair decorations worn proudly as they promenade the shrine walkways or gather with companions in coffee shops and restaurants. Their change of dress to honor the season symbolizes the ease with which the habits of the past intertwine with the customs of the present. The ongoing traditions weave as naturally into modern living as the colorful skeins of silk interlace to form patterns in the brocaded *obi* sashes that tie the kimonos of the celebrating Japanese women.

At other times of the year, in day-to-day encounters, a graceful kimono is less likely to be on view to signal to the foreign observer the juxtaposition of old and new. Nonetheless, the lingering forces of history and culture are subtly present to guide thinking and action. Often, the individual woman may not fully realize the basis of her own actions. She knows only that this is the Japanese way.

The traditional Japanese way embraces the heritage of centuries. The modern Japanese way evolved during the last one hundred years under the impact of a series of revolutionary changes. First, Emperor Meiji and his kindred modernizers superimposed new ideas and revamped

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Illustration opposite: Lady Murasaki, author of the *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel, sits at her writing table facing out onto her garden. Illustration courtesy Ise Grand Shrine.

methods. Then came General Douglas MacArthur and the Occupation policies and programs. In the last few decades, the miracle of economic growth has added further ferment to the modernization process. The interplay of these various dimensions creates the drama of the present time.

To understand the nature and extent of these adjustments of old and new, we must turn to history. In particular, let us peer at those special threads used on the loom of history to fashion the life design of the Japanese woman: family relationships, social status, education, political prerogatives, and economic well-being.

CHAPTER 1
THE WAY OF TRADITION

EARLY JAPAN— GODDESSES AND EMPRESSES

Our great Sovereign who rules in peace,
Offspring of the Bright One on high,
Wills, as a goddess, to rule her dominion
And to decree her towering Palace
On the plain of Fujiwara.

—*Manyōshū*, seventh century[1]

In the dawn of Japanese history women held positions of prestige and authority.

As mothers, women represented fertility and life for the primitive and superstitious familial bands. As queens of Yamatai in western Japan, they brought order to the land and engaged in international diplomacy with the rulers to the west on the mainland of Asia.

Legend made the female deity, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami, the founder of the Japanese imperial family. This "Heaven-Shining-Great Deity" commissioned her grandson Ninigi-no-Mikoto to descend from Heaven upon the Japanese Isles, carrying the three sacred insignia of the mirror, sword, and jewel, to govern and bring prosperity as enduring as that of Heaven and Earth. Thus was established the divine ancestry of the imperial line, which has reigned for more than a thousand years, combining within itself religious and dynastic supremacy. Imperial princesses became the high priestesses to care for the most holy of the Shintō religious shrines at Ise, dedicated to the worship of the Sun Goddess.

Popular lore and early chronicles set forth the position and power held by women in family, religion, and government in the Japanese

Isles in the period through the seventh century. One recent writer has called these early years the golden age of women in Japan. Modern women, from time to time, are strengthened by this heritage in their feminist endeavors.[2]

Queen Himiko

Chinese chroniclers, who gave the first sophisticated records of Japan, pointed to female dominance among the "people of Wa," as they called the Japanese in their third-century *History of the Kingdom of Wei* (*Wei chih*). They told of a Queen Himiko, a mature, unmarried ruler in western Japan whose name probably means sun daughter or princess. She is said to have practiced magic, revealing messages of the gods. Rarely seen, and living in a well-guarded palace with 1,000 women attendants, she maintained strict laws, ruling through her brother. In A.D. 238 she dispatched envoys to pay homage to the Chinese emperor and sent as tribute slaves and bolts of specially designed cloth. In return, the emperor bestowed upon her the title, "Queen of Wa Friendly to Wei."[3]

The Kojiki

The Japanese version of their own beginnings and early history came some four hundred years later in the writing of the *Kojiki* and the subsequent *Nihongi*, a dynastic project encouraged by various empresses of the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., including Empress Suiko and Empress Jitō. These official chronicles intertwine the mythological with the semihistorical to support the antiquity and glory of the imperial line. They relate the sagas of Amaterasu Ōmikami and the other gods and goddesses to show their relationship with the semilegendary first emperor of Japan, Jimmu, whose dynasty began, according to tradition, in 660 B.C.

A tale popular with Japanese women purports that Hiyeda-no-Are, a woman *kataribe*, a member of the guild of oral story-tellers to which women often belonged in early Japan, played a central role in giving life to the *Kojiki*.[4] When Empress Gemmyō commanded Ōno Yasumaro in 711 to "select and record the old works," he turned for assistance to the aged Hiyeda-no-Are, who had memorized all the old poems, myths, and stories. Word by word, as she recited the oral traditions, he wrote them down and produced the *Kojiki*.[5]

One of the outstanding figures emerging from this account of the misty early years is Empress Jingō (200–269 A.D.) whose posthumous name shows that she is revered as a woman second only to Amaterasu

Gods and goddesses dance and offer enticements to lure the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami from the cave in which she hid when her brother brought violence into the world. Artist: Itō Ryūgai. Photo courtesy of the Mayor of Ise.

Queen Himiko, third-century ruler of western Japan, is portrayed in regal attire, wearing a necklace with the curved jewel (*magatama*), one of the three sacred emblems of the imperial family. Artist: Yasuda Yukihiko. Photo couresty of Yasuda Kenichi.

Modern women dressed in holiday finery enjoy the poem card game that is traditionally played during New Year's festivities. The first of the one hundred poems of the game was composed by Empress Jitō. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Japan.

in greatness. Her dynamism is revealed in reports about how she rode to Kyūshū with her husband at the head of elaborately clad warriors to quell a rebellion. Deciding that the uprising was fomented by Korea, she—now alone, for her husband had died—disguised herself as a man and led the Japanese forces against the Koreans. The story goes that she rode on the prow of a battleship assisted by "great fishes of the ocean" and a miraculous wave across the sea to subjugate the enemy. This conquest opened the door to cultural influences from the Korean peninsula.[6]

Epoch of the Queens

During the remarkable two hundred years spanning the Asuka (A.D. 552–710) and Nara (A.D. 710–784) periods, by which time recognizable history overtakes earlier conjecture, one-half of the Japanese rulers were women. It might well be called the Epoch of the Queens. They were

women of command, merry and stout of heart. They set standards for the culture, religion, and mood of their times. They provided a matriarchal continuity for the imperial family as power struggles swirled around the throne. A few highlights can illustrate the political, intellectual, and human strengths for which these women are remembered.

Empress Suiko (592–628) is regarded as the first woman in historical times to ascend the throne of Japan. She presided during a time of intellectual ferment and change in social and governmental organization; she encouraged the channeling of Chinese civilization into many facets of Japanese life. Ruling with her nephew, the incomparable Prince Shōtoku, she helped establish Buddhism as a major religion in Japan and supported the creation of many of Buddhism's finest arts.[7]

Empress Jitō (687–697) was a strong-willed, intelligent beauty, renowned for her political astuteness. She supported the compilation of the great Japanese fundamental laws, culminating in the Taihō Code of 701. Under this revamped tax and land system, it must be noted, women received only two-thirds of the allotments in land redistribution available to men. Interestingly, Japanese women suffragists of the 1940s maintained that such inequity in the code was based on Chinese customs and that changes from the older traditional family system of giving a good deal of equality to women were only skin deep. Apart from her ruling capacities, Empress Jitō is widely remembered for the light-hearted *tanka* she wrote when she moved her capital to Fujiwara. Many modern Japanese can quote it as the first poem of the card game "100-persons-each-one-poem" (*Hyaku-nin-isshu*) traditionally played at New Year's celebrations:

> Spring has passed away
> And summer is come;
> Look where white clothes are spread in the sun
> On the heavenly hill of Kagu![8]

It was Empress Gemmyō (707–715), a patron of classical learning, as shown in her role in the preparation of the *Kojiki*, who established in Nara in 710 the first permanent capital of her kingdom, making possible a less casually organized and more centralized structure of government.

Another great beauty and skilled calligrapher, Empress Kōmyō (729–749), consort of Emperor Shōmu, must be mentioned even though she was not a ruling empress because she is remembered by women as the first volunteer social worker in her country. A devout Buddhist, she zealously propagated her faith. She constructed temples for worship and commissioned sculpture to enhance them, including the huge Buddha

of Tōdaiji Temple in Nara. Her deep religious sense prompted her to help the sick, orphaned, and needy, tasks that usually fell to the monks and others within religious orders. This reputation for charitable services gave rise to a now famous legend. It seems that one day a leprous beggar came to her and asked that she cleanse his sores with her mouth. Although she was repelled, her religious fervor pushed her to comply. Amazingly, the beggar turned into a Buddha before her eyes. He told her that he had appealed for this demeaning care to test her faith. As might be imagined, the Empress Kōmyō's charitable endeavors were not generally understood by the people, and she was severely criticized. Yet in due course, her good works won her the posthumous name of the "Empress who shines brightly."

Unfortunately, the daughter of Empress Kōmyō, a woman of equally great enthusiasm, managed to bring to an end this period of the queens through her propensity for love affairs. Empress Shōtoku (764–770), or Empress Kōken (749–758), for as she was empress twice she had two names, like her predecessors warmly supported Buddhism and the arts. When her military forces suppressed a civil war in 764, she gave thanks by printing 1 million religious charms. The few existing today are examples of the earliest printing in the world. More important, she served as a catalyst in the compilation of some three hundred and fifty years of native Japanese poetry, which, in straightforward, natural, and sometimes earthy style, had been composed by emperors and empresses, courtiers, soldiers of the frontier, young lovers, and common people alike. Portraying a cross-section of the emotions and longing of the people of early Japan, this collection, *Manyōshū,* or *Collection of Myriad Leaves,* is still cherished as part of the great traditional culture of the Japanese.

Despite her accomplishments, Shōtoku's amorous involvements with the Buddhist priest Dōkyo precipitated a political struggle. He aspired to become emperor with the willing help of his empress. The intrigue aroused the noble cliques at court. Civil war erupted, and the orbit of power swung in a new direction. Except for two figurehead empresses, Meishō and Gosakuramachi, during the Edo period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shōtoku was the last of the ruling empresses. Her debacle brought to an end the era of lively female sovereigns. Her passing foreshadowed a major change in the position of women.

Chinese Influences

In all fairness, it should be made clear that factors other than Empress Shōtoku's love life entered into her political difficulties and the subsequent general decline of women's power. Chinese ideas, absorbed for

several hundred years under the eager endorsement of the imperial families and the court, were gradually modifying the religious beliefs, governmental structures, social practices, and attitudes toward relationships of the Japanese people.

Buddhism, introduced from Korea in the middle of the sixth century, was fundamental in these changes. It brought new tenets, its own pantheon, and a special kind of mysticism. In time, it became a competitor to Shintō, the animistic native religion with its own deities and semisuperstitious rituals and customs, and precipitated countervailing power struggles in ruling circles and skirmishes over royal succession.

Chinese concepts of centralized political organization helped reorder the structure of government patterns, as seen in Prince Shōtoku's Seventeen-Article Constitution and the court ranking system. Ultimately this new system broke the hold of the age-old hereditary, local, semi-autonomous clan ruling groups reminiscent of Queen Himiko's country of Wa.

Confucianism offered a neat catalog of virtues and detailed an orderly and restrained structure of relationships of people to each other and to the natural order of the universe. Its integration into Japanese thinking paved the way for the acceptance of a rigid code of life of hierarchical form and stern moral discipline, subordinating the individual to the family and the state.

For Japanese women the new philosophies presaged less equality with men, more restrictive family relationships, and the loss of power and political authority. In the future they would turn to the indirect methods of leverage for which they are renowned to the present day. They would exert influence through their roles as wives and mothers, as beauties and entertainers, as guardians of the family assets, and as writers.

HEIAN JAPAN— ARISTOCRATS AND WRITERS

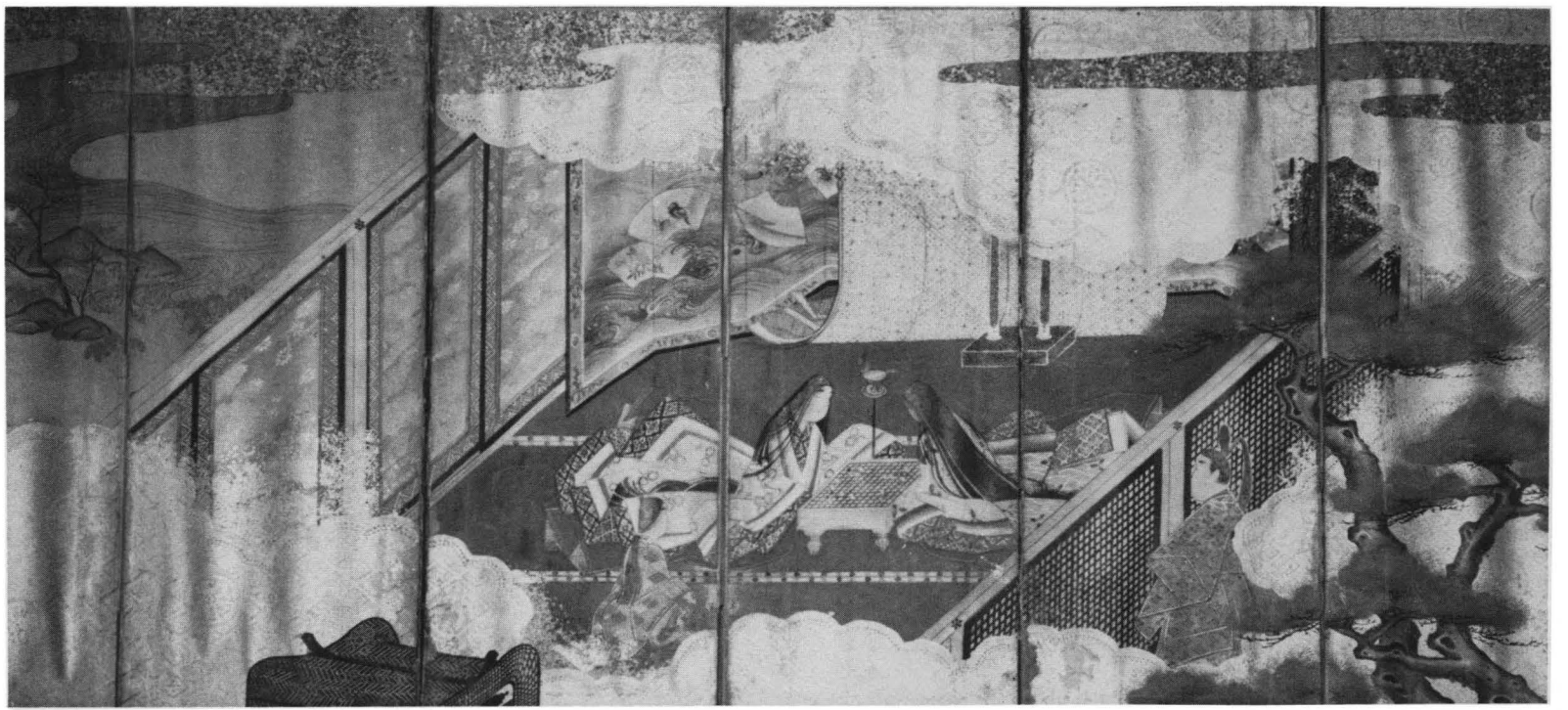
> *. . . Perhaps, she said to herself, even the story of her own dreary life, set down in a journal, might be of interest; and it might also answer a question: had that life been one befitting a well-born lady?*
>
> —Mother of Michitsuna, *The Gossamer Years*, tenth century[9]

The court ladies of the Heian years created the shining hour of Japanese literature.

From within the shadowy, screened confines of the women's quarters of the palaces and great houses of the court, noblewomen of the tenth and eleventh centuries peered out at the comings and goings of their fellow courtiers and shaped for posterity a shimmering world of elegance with their poems, diaries, and novels.

They lived in a golden age of peace and harmony, as the alternate name, Heian-kyō, of their proud capital city of Kyōto spelled out. Kyōto, built in 794 to permit the emperor and his court to escape the overburdening Buddhist influences developed during the Nara period, became in the Heian years the focal point of this brilliant society. Whereas in the Nara years the native Yamato traditional patterns of religion, life, and government were slowly assimilating the new cultural forms imported from China and Korea, in the Heian years the synthesis produced a thoroughly Japanized civilization. The manuscripts of the noble court ladies sparkle brightly at the pinnacle of this culture.

High-born Heian women, with their heavy gowns of many layers and myriad colors, long, streaming, glossy-black hair, shaved eyebrows, blackened teeth and languid manners, spent their lives hidden from the light and sun behind the silken curtains of their mansions, screened by the heavy drapes of their two-wheeled ox-drawn carriages, or secluded in retreat at a favorite temple. Within this dim world, symbolic in its way of their circumscribed scope of human concern, they looked piercingly around to probe mood and emotion. Unlike the vigorous women leaders of Nara and earlier, Heian women took little interest in politics and government per se. Instead they concentrated on social relationships, the drape of a sleeve, the turn of a poetic phrase, the



Heian ladies are depicted in an elegant secluded home setting, amusing themselves with the popular Japanese game of *go*. Antique screen in author's collection.

beauty of the seasons, the rituals of propitiation, and elaborate ceremonials.

While these women surrounding the imperial court may have, as Michitsuna's Mother bemoaned in her diary, spent their days in "trivialities,"[10] their perceptive writings about these days—and nights—depicted the character of one of the great patrician eras in history. Moreover, because the education given girls did not include adequate training in Chinese, which had come to be regarded as the intellectual language and to be reserved for the use of men, the Heian women wrote in their native Japanese. In so doing, they created the first truly native Japanese literature—and some of the best of it, at that.

Heian women, at least those of the aristocratic families, enjoyed certain freedoms and a stature in keeping with their rank. Under the law they were entitled to hold property. They were educated in the arts to develop personalities of refinement. Confucian emphases on family relationships and loyalty prevailed, and Japan was officially a monogamous society. Moral sensitivities and solid political reasoning, however, saw no harm in concubinage and the taking of lovers. The Fujiwara family, to cite the most illustrious example, had built its supremacy in large measure by providing its daughters to the emperors as empresses or royal concubines in the imperial household. This policy insured that future emperors were also Fujiwaras. Alternatively, after marriage a young wife might continue to live in her family home; the husband came to visit. This system at least precluded the problems of adjustment with the new in-laws that so beset Japanese brides of later times. Only in due time might a new home be set up. The comings and goings of this kind of marital relationship undoubtedly abetted the establishment of second houses. Equally, the teasing quality of the withdrawal of women behind their screens, enticing only with the display of a sleeve or the sending of a poem attached to a flower, led to countless more fleeting romantic encounters. The flavor of life was imbued with the Buddhist sense of impermanence.[11]

Court Diaries

Michitsuna's Mother, acclaimed as one of the three great beauties of her time, was greatly disturbed by such uncertain conditions of marriage. (Incidentally, we have no other name for her.) In her diary she lamented her "irregular" position or, at another point, her "ill-defined position,"[12] for she was not the first wife of Fujiwara Kaneie. She jealously, bitingly commented on the other eight or nine wives, concubines, and mistresses with whom he was involved over the years. She sent her most famous poem, attached to a withered chrysanthemum, to her husband asking

with poignancy and a certain melancholy, "Do you know how slow the dawn can be when you have to wait alone?"[13]

Other renowned diaries and commentaries of the time display different personalities and reveal varied reactions to this "dream path"[14] world. They vividly illustrate that the real women of Japan have not existed in stereotypic personality.

Lady Sei Shōnagon—quick, witty, perhaps even a punster—pictures in her *Pillow-Book* court life as seen from the palace of the Emperor's first wife, Fujiwara Sadako, where she served as a lady-in-waiting. Born into the Kiyohara family, noted for many generations for learning and literary skills, Sei Shōnagon came to the palace for the last decade of the tenth century, and her reminiscences and journal entries cover that period. Sparing neither herself nor those around her, she dissected episodes both pleasing and displeasing, ragged ponderous courtiers, relished the emotional fervor of her periodic religious services, and considered such subjects as "Disagreeable Things," "Amusing Things," "Things That Give Me an Uncomfortable Feeling," and "Children." That her vivacious, sometimes acerbic sense of humor did not always make her popular may be judged from Lady Murasaki's remarks in her diary: "Sei Shōnagon's most marked characteristic is her extraordinary self-satisfaction. . . . Her chief pleasure consists in shocking people; and as each new eccentricity becomes only too painfully familiar, she gets driven on to more and more outrageous methods of attracting notice."[15]

Annoying she may have been, but the world is the richer for Sei Shōnagon's fresh, amusing view of a life normally heavy with perfumed elegances and fastidious manners. She, at least, could criticize her lover on the clumsiness of his early-morning departure from her boudoir:

> It is very tiresome when a lover who is leaving one at dawn says that he must look for a fan or a pocket book that he left somewhere about the room last night. As it is still too dark to see anything, he goes fumbling about all over the place, knocking into everything and muttering to himself, "How very odd!" When at last he finds the pocket book he crams it into his dress with a great rustling of the pages; or if it is a fan he has lost, he swishes it open and begins flapping it about, so that when he finally takes his departure, instead of experiencing the feelings of regret proper to such an occasion, one merely feels irritated at his clumsiness.[16]

By contrast, the shy, introspective daughter of a provincial governor in her *Sarashina Diary* yearns for the romance she savors in her reading of the exploits of Lord Genji. She reaches out for only one brief encounter of the heart. It starts on an evening when "there was no starlight and

a gentle shower fell in the darkness."[17] She and an almost invisible young man share a conversation that holds promise of future meetings. It ends a year later after one more meeting and an exchange of poems, as she waits in vain for him to come and play his lute and sing to her. "I wanted to hear it and waited for the fit occasion, but there was none, ever,"[18] she gently concludes.

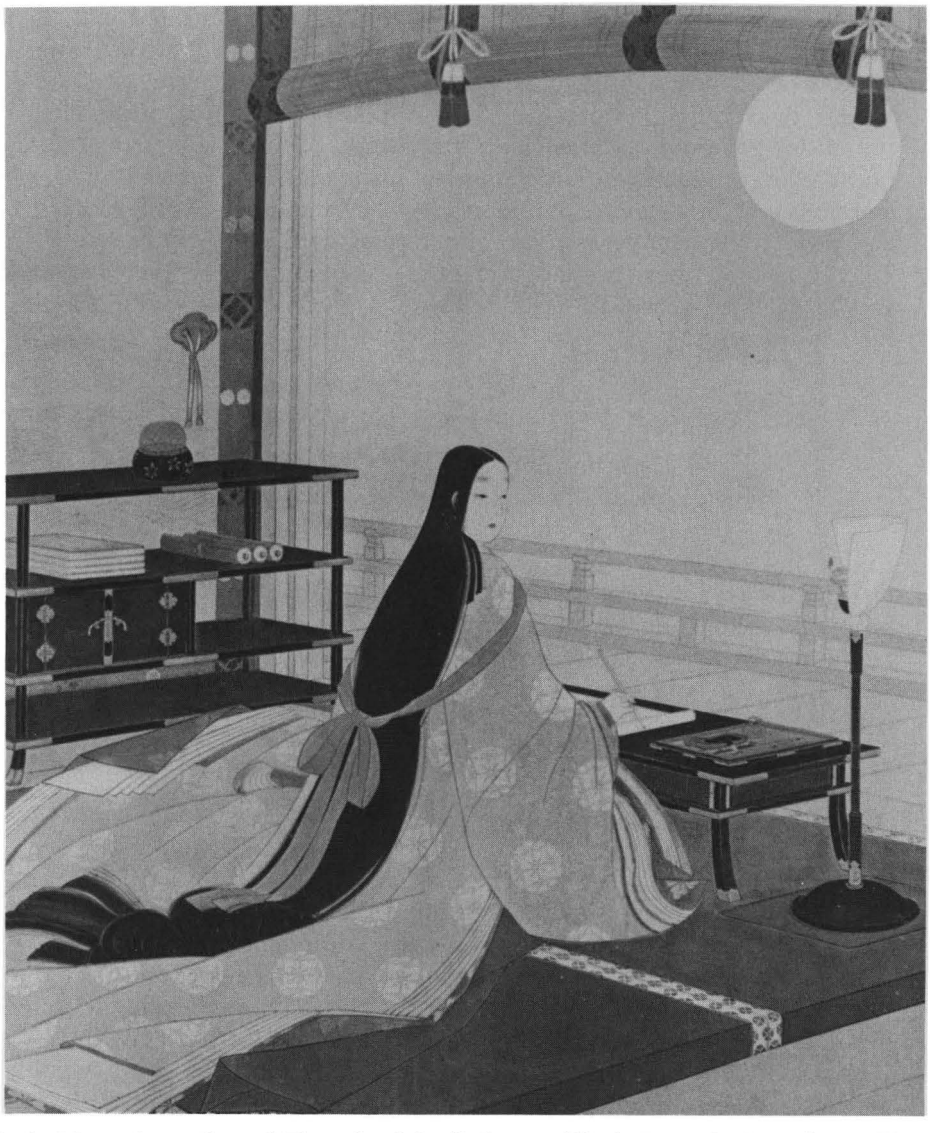
The provocative, impetuous Izumi Shikibu, daughter of another provincial governor, excelled in poetry, since admired as some of the finest ever produced in the Japanese language. She reveled in her emotions and the sequence of romantic entanglements with noble princes. Her diary covers the year or two of her passionate attachment to Prince Tamekaka and exists primarily to offer a setting for the love poems they exchanged. Early in their liaison she portrayed her emotions in these sentiments:

> I am a drop of dew
> Hanging from a leaf
> Yet I am not unrestful
> For on this branch I seem to have existed
> From before the birth of the world.[19]

Despite the gossip that surrounded her, Izumi Shikibu's fame as a poet prompted Akiko, queen of the Emperor's second household, to add Izumi to her coterie of Lady Murasaki and other ladies-in-waiting. Akiko wished to outshine with literary brilliance the entourage of the first consort, Queen Sadako.

Lady Murasaki

Most famous of all Heian women writers, Murasaki Shikibu[20] supplied still another type of mentality to this amazingly creative group. She was exceedingly bright, critical of mind, and interested in learning, much of which she had gleaned by eavesdropping on her brother's lessons. Of a Fujiwara family, she married another Fujiwara and seems to have had a happy marriage. After the death of her husband from pestilence, she filled her days with the writing of Lord Genji's many adventures and love affairs. *The Tale of Genji*, a piece of realistic fiction and the world's first novel, illuminates the times, attitudes, and life of the court Lady Murasaki knew so well and attests to the astuteness with which she observed the people around her. For example, each of the succession of women Genji loves emerges very much a distinct personality. But their stories also reveal that Murasaki, like Michitsuna's Mother, had few illusions about sexual relationships with men; too



Lady Murasaki, author of *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel, sits at her writing table, facing out into her garden. Artist: Kawasaki Shōko. Photo courtesy of the Mayor of Ise.

often they brought uncertainty for women, making them like "bits of driftwood."[21] She was, however, practical in her assessment, rather than wistful, or alternatively, a feminist. With her author's eye she analyzed women and, in the process, offered some advice about how to approach life. At one point, using the voices of her hero and some of his friends, she placed women in categories of merit and distinction in their role as wives. Initially, the gentlemen decide that no one woman can meet absolute standards of perfection. Each must inevitably balance virtue and defect. They consider in turn a "creature of unimagined beauty," "the zealous housewife," "paragons of misused fidelity," and "others who must needs be forever mounting guard over their own and their husband's affections."[22] At last one of the party concludes that in the long run the virtues of "generosity and reasonableness and patience do on the whole seem best."[23]

Lady Murasaki and her aristocratic colleagues of the writing brush left two important legacies to Japan. The first is the well-recognized, incomparable standard of literary merit. The second is that of the powerful role of the social critic who serves as a kind of contemporary public conscience dissecting the events and morals of the time. This latter role survived the passage down the long and tortuous developments of the feudal epochs as a bequest by the Heian women writers to the women of modern Japan—a gift they cherish and utilize to mold the character of their twentieth-century society.