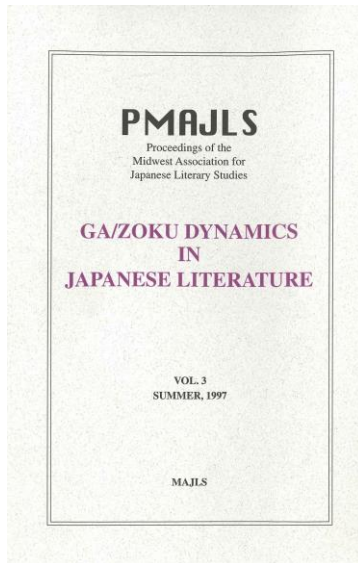


“*Ga-Zoku* and Verbal-Visual Dynamics in the
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Ga-Zoku and Verbal-Visual Dynamics in the
“Picture Contest” chapter of The Tale of Genji

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Introduction:

In the history of Japanese literature, the relationship between ga (orthodox, elegant, and pure) and zoku (unorthodox, radical, and mixed) has been both antipathetic and mutually supportive. They repel, but they also need each other for their existence. They are like the play of light and shadow on an object, quite inseparable. The relationships between the classic waka poem and Edo kyōka verse, and between The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu and Nisemurasaki Inaka Genji (the false Murasaki and the rustic Genji) by Ryūtei Tanehiko provide typical examples of the ga-zoku contrast. However, it is intriguing to note that some of the revered classics that now represent the ga were actually, in some respects, zoku at the time of their first appearance. In this paper, I will examine this point as it applies to The Tale of Genji.

Murasaki Shikibu was a highly educated Heian court lady, situated at the periphery of the Imperial Court hierarchy. Incorporating insights into both court life and life outside of the court, The Tale of Genji would appeal strongly to succeeding generations of both orthodox, ga people and heterodox, zoku people, and indeed, interactions between ga and zoku are a major theme in The Tale of Genji. In the “E-awase” or “Picture Contest” chapter, where the ga-zoku contrast is elaborated in some detail, Prince Genji emerges strikingly, as a champion of zoku in the midst of the prevailing ga background of Heian court

society. Let us, then, take a closer look at the Picture Contest. The picture contest as an institution did not exist in Murasaki Shikibu's time; in fact it is believed to have arisen in consequence of its fictional appearance in The Tale of Genji. Since no contemporary pictorial documents exist, all the illustrations I am going to use are from Genji-e (pictures recreating famous scenes from The Tale) of later periods.¹

Summary of the Picture Contest

Let us first look at the events leading up to the picture contest.² The Young Emperor (Reizei-tei) had two favorite ladies, Kokiden and Umetsubo. He was especially interested in pictures and he himself could paint with great skill. Since Lady Umetsubo could paint well, and with considerable originality, the Emperor began to favor her more. Gon-chūnagon, the father of Lady Kokiden, felt threatened by this evident partiality, since the Emperor's favor or disfavor directly affected his political fortunes. He began to commission master artists to paint pictures, many illustrating well-known tales or monogatari. He entertained the Emperor by showing these pictures, but did not actually present them to him, fearing that the Emperor might show them to Lady Umetsubo, his daughter's rival.

Bemused by the Gon-chūnagon's self-centered narrow-

¹ Akiyama Ken and Taguchi Eiji, eds. Genji Monogatari, "Genji-e no Sekai" (The Tale of Genji: The World of "Genji-Pictures"), Gakushū Kenkyūsha, Tokyo, 1988.

² References for the summary are from the following: Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1978, 307-317; Abe Akio, Akiyama Ken, and Imai Gen'ei. Genji Monogatari 2, Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū (hereafter referred to as NKBZ), 13, Shogakkan, Tokyo 1972, 358-383; and Yanai Shigeshi et al., Genji Monogatari 2, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei (hereafter referred to as SNKBT), 20, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1994, 165-186.

mindedness, Prince Genji told the Emperor that he himself possessed many classic pictures and would select appropriate works as a gift. Together with Lady Murasaki-no-ue, he selected pictures that could qualify under the aesthetics of imamekashi (contemporariness). He also brought out his own picture diary, created during his exile years in Suma, and showed it to Lady Murasaki-no-ue. [See Figure One.]



Fig 1. Picture Contest: Prince Genji shows his picture diary to Lady Murasaki-no-ue. (Jōdo Temple Collection). From The World of Genji Pictures (Hereafter referred as WGP), Ref. #2, 248.

Hearing that Prince Genji was also collecting pictures, Gonchūnagon redoubled his efforts, mounting his pictures on luxurious materials. It was early March, and the Court schedule was not crowded; everyone became preoccupied with picture collecting. The Umetsubo Group collected pictures of classic tales, all famous and with subtle depth. The Kokiden Group commissioned artists to paint well-known contemporary scenes with distinct freshness. Every one at Court was talking about those pictures.

Lady Fujitsubo, the mother of Emperor Reizei, was intrigued by this sudden interests in pictures. She gathered both sides in her quarters to hold a private picture contest, following the format of the Tentoku Uta awase, or Tentoku Imperial Court Poetry Contest, which was held in front of the Emperor Murakami in 960.³ The court ladies were divided into two teams, with the Umetsubo Group on the left and the Kokiden Group on the right. Each side was to present one picture at a time, and speak in support of its quality. [See Figure Two.]

In the first round, the Left presented pictures illustrating Taketori Monogatari while the Right produced illustration of Toshikage from Utsubo Monogatari. There was no winner, despite eloquent presentations by learned court ladies from both Left and Right. The next round saw Ise Monogatari from the Left and Shō Sanmi from the Right, again with no conclusive victor. This whole contest was kept strictly private, but Prince Genji heard about it, and proposed that the contest be held in front of the Emperor himself.

On the day of the contest, the Left and the Right brought their pictures in front of the Emperor, with all interested courtiers in attendance. [See Figure 3.] The Emperor summoned both Gon-chūnagon and Prince Genji to his presence, along with Prince Hotaru (Firefly), a culturally sophisticated courtier who was to serve as the judge in this contest. The Left's presentation, consisting of pictures of the four seasons by classic artists, were artistically superb, but the limited dimensions of the paper did

³ Participants in Tentoku Poetry Contest (Uta-awase) are split into left and right sides for competition. There is no prior historical record for a picture contest, and this type of event is thought to be the creation of Murasaki Shikibu. The format follows the model of the Tentoku Imperial Court Poetry Contest, held in the fourth year (960) of the Tentoku Era under the auspices of Emperor Murakami. See Notes 5 and 6 in the NKBZ version of Genji, 370, and Notes 1 and 2 from the SNKBT version, 180.

not allow for full expression of a style more appropriate to screen paintings. The Right's presentation of contemporary art works, though lacking in depth, nevertheless was flashy and interesting.

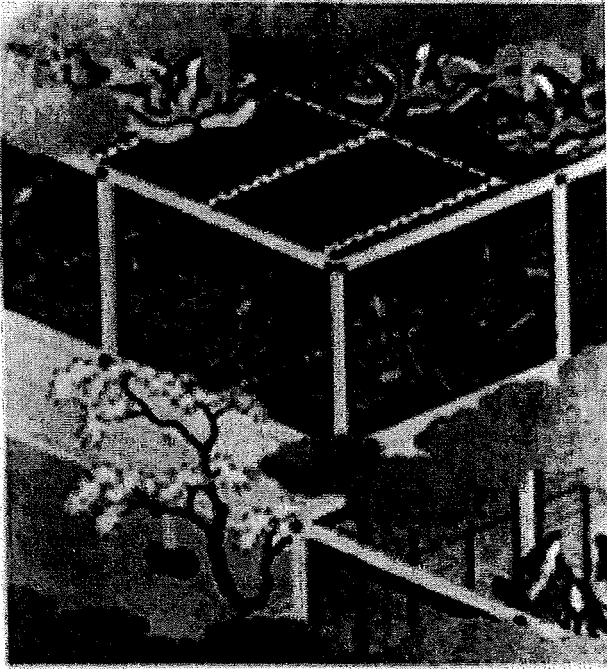


Fig. 2 Informal Picture Contest in front of Lady Fujitsubo. By Tosa Mitsunori (1583-1638). From WGP, Fig. 68, 86.

The contest lasted into the night with no apparent winner. When each side had only one work left, the Left presented Prince Genji's picture diary depicting his exile years at Suma. It consisted of superb landscapes with grass-style (cursive) writings in both kanji and kana, and even included some moving waka poems. Everyone present was deeply impressed, and all previous works were eclipsed by this picture diary. The Right decided not

to present their last picture. Thus the Left was declared the winner.

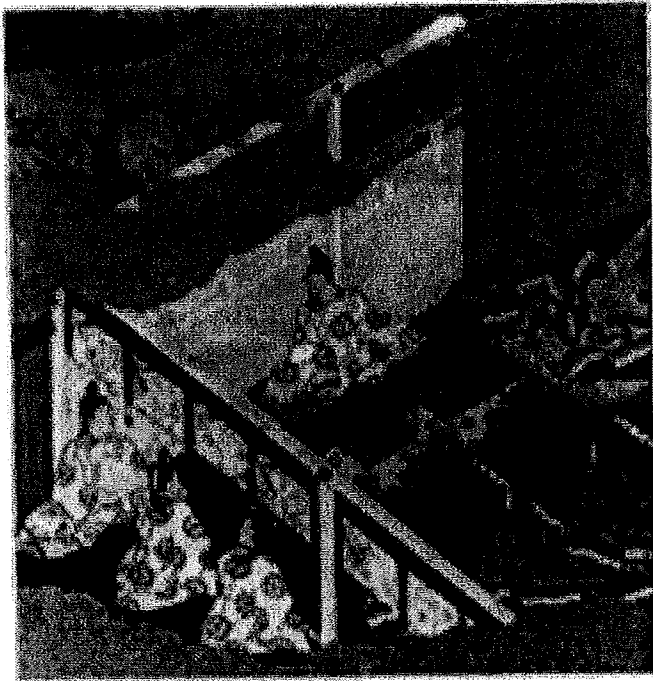


Fig.3. Picture Contest in front of Emperor Reisei (brown for Left, purple for Right), Prince Firefly, the judge, sits in front of two boxes containing pictures. Attributed to an Artist of the Tosa School. From WGP, Fig. 69, 87.

The party at court continued into the early morning. Prince Genji discussed the nature of artistic activity with Prince Firefly, confiding that though he had been able to learn many arts, he had, in general, never achieved a very satisfactory level. The exception was the art of painting, and here he had wished for some time to be able to paint to his own satisfaction. Through the force of circumstances--namely his own exile to Suma, where

he could directly observe the depth of nature--he was finally able to master the art of painting. [See Figure Four.]

Prince Firefly remarked that while all the court nobility were trained in the arts, and could in general attain excellence under a capable teacher, the art of the brush (i.e. painting) and the game of Go seemed to be exceptions, with the outcome of training largely governed by inborn talent. People knew of Genji's talents in other areas such as writing and music, but no one suspected that his painting ability overshadowed even that of the classic masters.

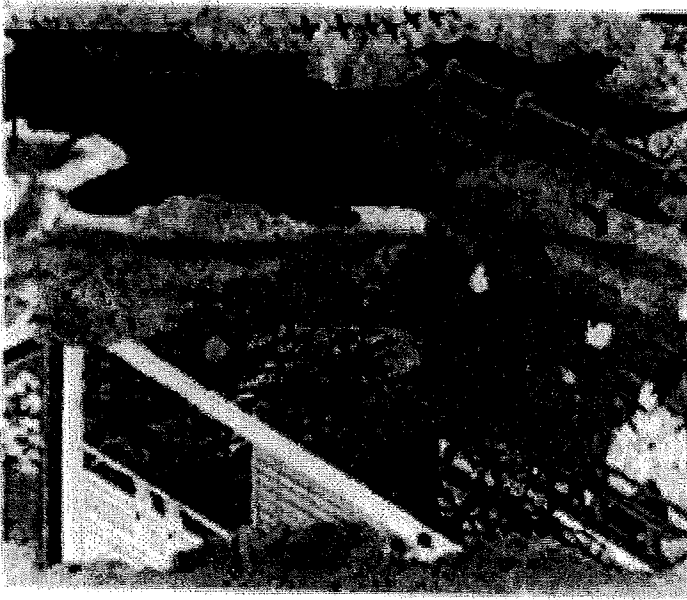


Fig. 4. Genji Observing Migrating Birds and Passing Boats at Suma Island. By Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1539-1613). From WGP," Fig. 49, 70.

As the early morning moon illuminates the court, Genji is joined in musical ensemble by Gon-chūnagon, Prince Firefly,

and a court lady. Here again, Genji demonstrates his talents as an outstanding musician. [See Figure Five.]



Fig. 5. Post-Picture Contest Musical Ensemble, in the cover of a hand copied "Picture Contest" (E-awase) chapter, (15th century?). By an artist of the Tosa School. From WGP," Fig. 70, 89.

The picture contest solidified Genji's already ascending position at the Imperial Court. However, at the end of this chapter, Genji, now at the peak of his power, is contemplating the evanescence of such glory, and begins to yearn for a life of retirement in a small retreat in the quiet countryside. However, his concern for the still-young members of his family does not permit him to fulfill his own wish yet.

Analysis of the Picture Contest:

In terms of ga-zoku dynamics, the theme of this conference, this chapter contains three elements, or structural layers.

I. First, the "Picture Contest" chapter introduces a new dimension to ga-zoku dynamics, namely the interaction between verbal and visual elements. Since early times, verbal elements had enjoyed a status superior to that of visuals, and even within the verbal texts there was a status difference between imported Chinese characters and the native-born kana syllabary. All official records were kept in Chinese, and Chinese-style poetry by male courtiers, written in Chinese characters, was considered to be superior to Japanese waka poetry, and to monogatari fiction authored by women, both written in the mixed media of Chinese characters and Japanese kana syllabary. Thus Murasaki's use of pictures as the major subject for an Imperial Court event constituted a striking statement in support of the importance of pictorial elements as a means of expression- a highly unorthodox or zoku position for her time.

II. Secondly, the picture contest sets works by established artists, illustrating well-known classic tales, against works by contemporary master artists, illustrating contemporary tales and noteworthy current events. While there is, from the beginning, a contrast between classic and contemporary themes, the first works shown are all the products of professional artists in well-established styles. But Murasaki gives the ultimate victory to the work of a talented amateur: Genji's "picture diary," which fully expresses the human emotions associated with exile far away from the Capital. This work integrates pictures, kanji and kana syllabi, and even waka poems, expressing emotions and depicting nature according to direct personal experience. Genji's encounters with real nature (flying geese) and working people (boat crews) are well documented in the earlier Suma chapter.

Genji himself states that his Suma experience enlightened him as an artist. This picture diary not only impresses everyone in the Court by its skill and beauty, but also captivates them emotionally. This stress on the expressive power of all elements in the diary, along with the proposal of Genji's own daily life in exile as a proper subject matter represents the innovative views of author Murasaki Shikibu. The affirmation of the zoku, or unorthodox and original, could not be presented more eloquently.

III. Thirdly, when Genji has won the conflict within the Imperial Court and is at the top of his power and glory, his heart is already away in the countryside. He is beginning to value the world outside of the capital's culture center over life within the Court. This denial of the values of the center of the ga culture suggests the most radical aspect of Murasaki's literary venture, namely its affirmation of zoku, or life and art in direct link with the real world in the countryside. [See Figure Six, which illustrates the three layers of ga/zoku dynamics in the "Picture Contest."]

Conclusion:

Author Murasaki Shikibu constructed three layers of ga-zoku dynamics in the "Picture Contest" chapter, contrasting letters (verbal) with pictures (visual), orthodox professional art with innovative amateur art, and power-obsessed capital life with tranquil country existence. In all cases, she gave superior status to the zoku elements, casting Prince Genji, the ultimate figure of ga in Japanese literature, as a champion in his own time of the zoku cause.

Acknowledgments

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from "Genji-e no sekai" (referred to in note 2).

IMPERIAL COURT EVENT

	Heterodoxy	<u>replaces</u>	Orthodoxy
I	Visual Picture Contest		Verbal Poetry Contest
	Left Side		Right Side

	Suma/Countryside		Kyoto/Capital
	Amateur	<u>wins over</u>	Professional
II	Picture Diary [Pictorial expression of personal emotion and direct experience with nature and working people]		Painting [Pictures of fiction, and noteworthy events]

<u>Genji, the Winner</u>			
III	Rustic country retreat	<u>appeals more than</u>	Imperial court as the center of elegant culture

Fig. 6. Three Layers of Ga-Zoku Dynamics in the "Picture Contest" Chapter in The Tale of Genji