

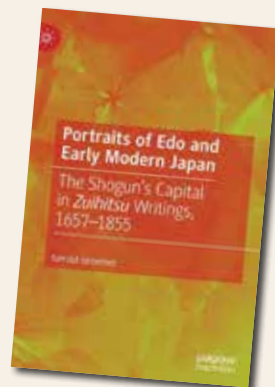
BOOK REVIEW

Portraits of Edo and Early Modern Japan: The Shogun's Capital in Zuihitsu Writings, 1657–1855

Translated and edited by Gerald Groemer

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019
xxix + 372 pages.

Reviewed by Timon SCREECH



This inviting compilation follows Gerald Groemer's previous offering of translations from the same genre published in 2018, *The Land We Saw, the Times We Knew* (University of Hawai'i Press). While the former volume covered topics of Edo life, this focuses on Edo itself, "the shogun's capital" (not of course Japan's capital, which was Kyoto). As all who study Edo are fully aware, *zuihitsu* are a fundamental point of access to the life and thought processes of the period, or at least of the urban classes. The genre label can be translated as "random jottings." It is traceable to Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, 1002), and Yoshida Kenkō's *Tsurezure-gusa* (*Essays in idleness*; 1330–1332). But the genre took off in Edo's civic spaces. Many an educated townsman, and the occasional townswoman, picked up brushes to write about the world they lived in, with its pleasures and trials. Unlike the Italian *zibaldone* or wider European *locus communis* collections (aka "commonplace books")—with which they have some affinities—*zuihitsu* are entirely inward-looking. John Locke or Ralph Emerson made scrapbooks by transcribing what they read and mused upon, as well as what they heard and saw in the street. But their Edo confreres restrict themselves to the local orbit. By telling us so deliciously about changes in haircut, or types of towel, Edo writers also shock us with the narrow range of their interests. This is the dilemma of *zuihitsu* for readers today. They are valuable for those delving into the minutiae of Edo lore, but are without interest for other people. Later writers lacked the caustic wit of Sei Shōnagon or the literary flourish of Kenkō. To be blunt, they can be pretty boring. It is raw data. Historians in the Annales school would cry out for this kind of material in relation to France, but such people are few. I, for one, find it valuable to learn that when Edo had a population of 1.29 million, there were 52,000 monks and nuns, and 36,000 Shinto priests (p. 256). However, when another writer tells us, "until the Kansei period kites did not possess as many horizontal ribs as they do in today's Kaei Period" (p. 271), I am one of a larger body of readers who do not care.

Most *zuihitsu* are without *event*. Being often written by the elderly, they hark on about change, but in an organic, incremental way. In the introduction, Groemer ponders whether *zuihitsu* can be called "literature." He is too honest to propose that they are, admitting that texts are often cobbled together—"scribbled words" in which the author just "whines" (pp. 9 and 11). It is interesting, in this regard, that *zuihitsu* (including the first two given here)

often have unknown authors. Writers' personalities were not cherished, even when the texts were handed on. Or perhaps concealing identities conveyed an aura of objectivity.

It is Groemer's goal, of course, to promote *zuihitsu*. He does this in two ways. One is by applying to the Japanese texts his own broad command of English. Page after page we have Groemer's beautiful use of language. It certainly compels us through. But it is a significant upscaling of the originals. Some may actually find it overdone, where no noun is allowed to pass without an adjective, and no verb without an adverb—though to be fair, this is more often in the Introduction, where Groemer has free rein. Elsewhere, he comes up with some wonderful translations that I hope will be widely adopted: “kickovers” for *ke-korobashi*, or low-grade sex workers, and “cabin boats” for *yakata-bune*. I wish I had thought of these myself.

The second valorising stance is in the selections themselves. It is natural that Groemer chose interesting texts, but the result is that we do not quite have an overview of the genre, even those that discuss the shogunal seat. Some works included here are not considered *zuihitsu* by most scholars. Still, thanks to the nature of Groemer's prose, and the texts he has chosen to work with, we have here a nice vista into Edo life and times.

We are told that most *zuihitsu* were written by “staunch conservatives” often moved to write in their riper years. Over history, old people, especially if also conservative, have tended to look back and regret how things have changed. *Zuihitsu* are, in essence, repositories for the moanings of such people. It is valuable for some types of historian (I am one) to have access to most of this, but there is always the rub that grievances may not be legitimate, nor even accurate. When an eighty-year-old man reports on what the world was like when he was ten, his claims are suspicious, even if the intent is honest. Many remonstrances are also distinctly off-the-peg, such as that young men no longer greet their parents properly at New Year, but “just scuttle about town in search of loose pleasures” (p. 94). So, too, complaints that parents no longer help children with their homework, nor even care if schooling across ages and periods takes place at all, such that “few [children] practice anything” (p. 99). Sadly typical, too, are the many condemnations of women getting out of place. To the modern reader, actually, many of the deplored changes sound like improvements. But to *zuihitsu* writers, the world was going to the dogs. The cause, women being above themselves, yes, but this was all part of “luxury” (*zeitaku*), “which should be shunned and feared” (p. 231). Edo consumerism had its discontents, and it was the role of *zuihitsu*, above all, to capture this. I do not think anyone could have made the genre more approachable than Groemer has.