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Where Does Love Come From?

A Cultural Inquiry into the Making of Romantic Love in Japan

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ci siamo già incontrati.

要旨

本論文の目的は、時代の流れの中で、日本における恋愛の定義を形作り、再定義、そして変化させてきた宗教的影響を考察することである。起源から始まり、『古事記』や『万葉集』など飛鳥時代・奈良時代の初期文献をもとに、神道が男女関係にどのような影響を与えてきたのかを検討する。また、これらの物語に見られる古代の日本における恋愛的実践についても分析する。

次に、平安時代の仏教に焦点を移し、仏教において愛が悟りや涅槃に到達するためにどのように乗り越えるべきものと考えられたのかを考察する。当時の社会的な関係を示す史料は限られているため、本論文では主に『源氏物語』に見られる恋愛の描写を中心に分析を行う。この作品は光源氏の恋愛遍歴を描き、当時の恋愛観を考える上で重要な資料である。

さらに、江戸時代に入ると儒教思想が広く普及し、社会秩序だけでなく男女関係にも新たな規範を与えた。儒教の価値観は恋愛感情の自由な表現を抑制し、恋愛文学の発展も制限した。本章では、これらの思想が家制度の内部関係に与えた影響や、孝の概念によって父系中心の家族構造が強化され、女性の行動の範囲が限られていた点について考察する。

最後に、日本におけるキリスト教の到来に注目する。キリスト教は戦国時代に宣教師によってもたらされ、弾圧の後、明治・大正時代に再び広まり、「西洋的」な自由恋愛や夫婦の平等といった新しい恋愛観を広めた。本論文の最後では、小説ではなく当時の雑誌やメディアに注目し、そこでの議論や社会的変化を分析することで、恋愛結婚の定着と現代日本における恋愛観の形成過程を明らかにする。

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Introduction – Notes on Love

Love who moves sun and other stars. – Dante

We are often led to assume that emotions, as a natural dimension of human life, are universally shared and therefore experienced by all individuals in similar ways. In a rather simplistic manner, for example, if we are enjoying ourselves while spending time with friends, it seems natural to believe that everyone present is feeling something like what we are feeling. This assumption makes it particularly difficult to understand situations in which, at some later point in life, someone who shared those very moments with us reveals that they did not, in fact, experience the same level of enjoyment. Such realizations can be surprising and even disorienting, as they challenge our taken-for-granted belief in the universality of emotions and highlight the subjective, deeply individual way they are experienced.

Of course, this topic opens a wide range of considerations as there are many possible explanations for why individuals may perceive or respond differently in social situations. Some people may lack social awareness, while others may be less sensitive to the emotions of those around them. In other cases, individuals who have recently moved to a new cultural environment may not yet have learnt how to interpret unfamiliar social cues. Similarly, some may struggle with understanding body language, while others, in a more straightforward sense, may simply place little value on recognizing or responding to others' emotions. The number of such variables is virtually endless, making it impossible to account for all of them when trying to analyze how each participant in a seemingly enjoyable group activity is feeling, as well as how they interpret the emotions of other members in the very same situation.

From this general observation, the present study turns to one specific variable among these many possibilities: cultural background and how various religions have historically portrayed romantic love and shaped romantic practices.

In particular, this dissertation stems from an initial impulse to compare my own situation, as an Italian born at the end of the twentieth century, educated in public schools and shaped, whether consciously or not, by a surrounding Christian religious and cultural framework, with that of a person living in a similar time span but shaped by different cultural influences in Japan. From this first comparative proposal, the dissertation gradually developed and elaborated into a broader historical and cultural inquiry. Rather than offering a psychological or sociological analysis, this study adopts

a historical and cultural approach, focusing on religious influences as they appear first in literary texts and later, with the approach of modernity, through social developments and legal changes. In doing so, it attempts to trace how these influences contributed not only to the shaping of modern conceptions of romantic love in Japan, but also to the emergence of specific romantic practices.

At this point, it is necessary to pause briefly to address the question of religiosity in Japan, particularly the way religion is perceived both by the Japanese themselves and by external observers. From an outside perspective, religion in Japan seems closely connected to daily life and routines. Japanese culture has long drawn on a layered tapestry of folk beliefs, Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christian traditions that have coexisted and interacted rather than forming clearly separated systems. Because Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity are overtly religious traditions, their presence is relatively easy to identify, yet Confucian moral values have also often been experienced as religious in everyday life.[1]

The Japanese equivalent of "religion," or *shūkyō* (宗教), was only coined at the beginning of the Meiji period, Japan's era of modernization and Westernization. Prior to that, there was no Japanese equivalent of the English term "religion." This does not mean that religions did not exist: from prehistoric folk practices to imported systems like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, multiple religions had long coexisted in Japan. The absence of a term distinguishing these "religions" from other activities, however, reflects how fundamentally different Japanese perceptions of religion have been, and perhaps still are, compared with Western understandings.[2]

Moreover, despite the historical prevalence of Buddhism and Shinto, most Japanese do not describe themselves as religious. Engagement with religious practices is often absorbed into customs, social habits, and morality, without being explicitly labeled "religious" by participants.[3] As Weber notes, "defining religion is fundamentally problematic because religious behaviors are so diverse that understanding can only be achieved by focusing on the subjective experiences and interpretations of those involved, by considering how individuals interpret the meaning of religious behavior."[4] Understanding the gap between practice and self-perception is therefore crucial, as it shows that

[1] John Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998): 46–79.
[2] Megumi Matsuura, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[3] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[4] Megumi Matsuura, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

religious influence in Japan extends beyond simple belief, shaping emotions, morality, and even the definition of romantic love.

With this in mind, the introduction now turns to the main focus of the thesis. Across different historical periods, social contexts, hierarchies, everyday practices, and legal transformations, this study traces the ways in which romantic love has been expressed and redefined over time. Attention is given to the semantic dimension of love: how it was named, discussed, and reshaped through the gradual introduction of new words and shifting meanings. At times, these changes were influenced by dominant religious forces; at others, they emerged from pressures toward social reforms, modernization, and cultural developments.

Beginning with the *Kojiki*, the earliest written source, and moving toward more modern and contemporary terms, the thesis follows the evolving vocabulary of love and the changing assumptions behind it. Through this semantic lens, romantic love does not appear as a fixed or universal concept, but as one that continuously adapted to the needs, values, and structures of society, taking on different nuances as it encountered both internal and external religious influences. This brief theoretical detour aims to deepen the reader's understanding and provide a wider perspective on how romantic love has changed in modern Japan. The evolution of these ideas in cultural and geographical margins, such as among the Ainu of Hokkaidō or in the Ryūkyū Kingdom of the Okinawa region, is not covered here and remains an opportunity for future research.

The analysis will begin with a brief history of Shinto, focusing on the earliest written representations of romantic heterosexual relationships. In the *Kojiki*, for example, the union of the deities Izanami and Izanagi provides an early depiction of what can be understood as natural, reciprocal desire. By examining this text alongside the *Man'yōshū*, we can trace first glimmers of romantic love practices in ancient Japanese society. Moving forward, the representation of romantic love evolves through the Heian period, where Buddhist influence begins to infuse love with a dramatic and often suffering-laden character. In works such as *Genji Monogatari*, love shifts from a natural phenomenon to one permeated with anguish and impermanence, while some enduring patterns persist: women are often depicted waiting for men, and the exchange of poetry continues as a central romantic practice.

This pattern is further reinforced under Neo-Confucian influence, where the role of women becomes increasingly defined in terms of subordination. During this period, less and less literary texts explicitly explore romantic love, as the consolidation of the *ie system* and the emphasis on arranged marriages prioritized the needs of the family over individual desire.

The arrival of Jesuits and Christianity initially introduced Japanese people to new ideas of love and affection during the "Christian Century," though this period was brief. With Japan's *sakoku*, the influence of Christian conceptions of love and romantic practices, derived from Western religious and cultural traditions, would not be fully perceived until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Meiji Restoration ideas about love and marriage began to change and, by the early twentieth century, romantic love increasingly became associated to a positive force that brought not only individual fulfillment but also equal rights for both men and women.

After this initial introduction, however, it is useful to take a step back.

While not strictly necessary for the focus of this dissertation, it's important to note a key idea that supports much of the analysis: the difference between emotions and feelings. Emotions are immediate, often unconscious reactions with a primitive origin; in short, they are what the body does. Feelings, by contrast, are the ways in which the mind interprets and organizes these reactions, shaped by memories, beliefs, temporary states of mind, and other contextual influences. In other words, feelings can be seen as the narrative the human brain constructs around the experiences an individual encounters in their everyday life.[5] There is another crucial point to emphasize: while emotions are considered universal, the way in which they are experienced as feelings is profoundly subjective.[6] Emotions are instantaneous reactions shared across all human beings, they include anger, sadness, joy, disgust, fear, and surprise. Feelings, however, are far more complex and variable, as they are shaped by countless factors such as family dynamics, personal history, and, of particular relevance to this study, cultural background.[7]

Now that the subjectivity of feelings has been established, I will turn to the central theme of this dissertation: romantic love. It is important to specify the adjective "romantic" before the term *love*, as the English word encompasses various meanings, and for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to distinguish it from other forms of love that do not involve a sexual aspect. While love itself is not limited by gender, this study focuses on the romantic dynamics and practices of heterosexual couples in Japan across the centuries. This focus is not because I deem same-sex love as less important, but because exploring it would require addressing different cultural and social dynamics in Japanese history, which can not be fully analyzed within this dissertation.

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[5] Hans Flemming, "Distinguishing Between Feelings and Emotions in Understanding Communication Effects," *Journal of Business Research* (2005): 1326–1436.
[6] Raffaello Antonino, "How Emotions Differ from Feelings and Why It Matters," *Therapy Central*, June 29, 2025, https://therapy-central.com/2025/06/29/how-emotions-differ-from-feelings-and-why-it-matters/.
[7] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.

Romantic love is not limited to the wealthy or to complex societies, like some anthropologists have argued, nor is it exclusively heterosexual or necessarily linked to marriage. It is not by nature associated to capitalism, sexual oppression, small families, motherhood, or identity, and it cannot be reduced to simple lust or explained only as a result of evolution. Rather, romantic attraction can be seen as a way of coping with social tensions and contradictions through a deep bond with another person, sometimes compared to religious ecstasy.[8] Ulrich Beck defines fulfilled romantic love as a form of gratification that surpasses either love or desire on their own. In many Western, and Western-influenced, contexts, it is regarded as an end itself, almost elevated to the status of an "earthly religion."[9]

At the same time, scholars have highlighted the importance of close personal relationships in promoting healthy personal growth and positive social behavior,[10] showing the importance of romantic bonds for both individuals and society. Within this context, romantic relationships are often highlighted for their remarkable benefits, including personal growth, companionship, happiness, the capacity to love, and the experience of being loved.[11]

At this stage, having discussed emotions, feelings, and the universality of love, it is important to note that previous research has shown that more collectivist cultures generally hold less romanticized or idealized perceptions of love. Quantitative studies, for example, have indicated that societies influenced by Buddhist traditions tend to exhibit more moderate views toward both love and hate, whereas those shaped by Christian traditions often display more polarized attitudes toward these emotions. Such findings highlight the necessity of considering the role of religious and cultural influences in shaping emotional expression and interpretation, particularly in relation to emotions such as love and hate, which play a central role in the formation of relationships, the establishment of families, and the dissolution of bonds.[12]

In conclusion, this dissertation was motivated by a curiosity to understand the cultural and religious influences, evolving practices, and linguistic and semantic changes associated with the concept of romantic love, tracing a journey through the history of romantic love in Japan from the

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[8] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[9] Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Ulrich Beck, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
[10] Marilyn J. Montgomery and Gwendolyn T. Sorell, "Love and Dating Experience in Early and Middle Adolescence: Grade and Gender Comparisons," *Journal of Adolescence* 21 (1998): 677–689.
[11] Susan L. Kline, Brian Horton, and Shuangyue Zhang, "Communicating Love: Comparisons Between American and East Asian University Students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (2008): 200–214.
[12] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.

Asuka period up to the mid-twentieth century. To explore this question, the research examines the major religious influences that have shaped Japan over the centuries, including Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism and, later, Christianity, with a focus on how these traditions have depicted, interpreted, and influenced Japanese understandings of romantic love. The dissertation concludes with reflections and insights drawn from brief interviews, which are intended to offer additional perspectives and may serve as a foundation for future research in this field.

On the Major Influences on Romantic Love in Europe and Italy

Love, which excuses no one who is loved from loving. – Dante

The influence of the Italian peninsula on the development of the European concept of romantic love is undeniable. In its earliest stages, this concept developed in the heart of Europe, where Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom continually influenced one another through cultural exchange and literary production.[13] The evolution of romantic love, in fact, took shape first and foremost as a literary phenomenon, emerging from poetry, songs, and narrative long before it became a lived social ideal.[14] Over time, however, the European understanding of romantic love, deeply shaped by its cultural, religious, and literary heritage, had spread far beyond the continent. Through songs, plays, movies, and stories, this vision of love has been carried across the world, endlessly depicting its joys and sorrows, the pain and ecstasy of love found, tested, lost, and denied. In much of the Western world, romantic love is thus understood as an intense emotional attraction toward an idealized other, a vision that continues to shape expectations and yearnings across the world. Today, young people across many cultures express a growing desire to choose their own partners, rejecting arranged marriages and favoring passionate relationships that they hope will lead to a deep and harmonious union with an ideal partner.[15]

Yet this raises an essential question: where does this ideal originate?

It is worth reflecting on this. Every time a lover "worships" their beloved, when a woman says it would be "hell" to live without her partner, or when a man asks to be taken "to heaven," or describes his lover as a "goddess," they are drawing from a vocabulary clearly rooted in religious language.[16] This observation recalls Ulrich Beck's definition of fulfilled romantic love as a form of gratification elevated to the status of an "earthly religion."[17] When discussing religion in relation to cultural ideals, it is essential to consider Christianity: the faith that had an overpowering influence on the development of European culture and its conception of love. Christianity frames love and hate as

[13] Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
[14] Edgar Landgraf, "Romantic Love and the Enlightenment: From Gallantry and Seduction to Authenticity and Self-Validation," *The German Quarterly* 77 (2004): 29–46.
[15] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.
[16] Christopher Ash, "Christianity and Sexuality," *Christ on Campus Initiative*, September 20, 2013, https://christoncampuscci.org/christianity-and-sexuality/.
[17] Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Ulrich Beck, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

opposing moral forces, with love positioned as the embodiment of God and goodness, directly countering hate, which is associated with evil and conflict.[18]

By no means were the classical Greeks and Romans unaware of the experience of love. One need only think of Cupid and his arrows, or the numerous myths and legends born from Zeus' amorous adventures and the caprices of other deities. The idea of love as an overwhelming and irrational force would have been entirely familiar to them.[19] They had a clear conceptualization of love and its many nuances, *eros*, *storge*, *philia*, so it is unsurprising that psychologist John Alan Lee, in developing his Color Wheel theory of love, drew upon Latin and Greek terminology to identify six love styles: three primary types (*Eros*, *Ludus*, and *Storge*) and three secondary forms (*Mania*, *Pragma*, and *Agape*).[20] Yet, in those ancient stories, human desires are depicted as unruly, erratic, and unpredictable, overwhelming at one moment and leaving one cold the next.[21] As Lewis notes, "In ancient literature, love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness."[22] Additionally, what those Greek and Roman narratives lacked was the inclusion of women as active participants of the structured social code of love, a sphere that had long been dominated by men. It was exactly this shift that represented a profound transformation in the cultural imagination of love, granting women a central role in shaping desire, behaviors, and social norms.[23]

Those times, however, belong to a distant past whose influence holds little relevance to the unique nature of modern European thought and its quite personal attachment to the ideal of romantic love. By the nineteenth century, for both authors, travelers, and I might add, readers as well, *Italy* and *Romantic* had become almost synonyms, firmly associating Italian culture with the evolving European ideal of passionate and elevated love.[24]

According to well-known romantic clichés, love is blind, it overwhelms, a life without love is not worth living, marriage should be for love alone, anything less is but empty and insincere. Romantic love cannot be bought or sold; it cannot be measured or calculated. It is mysterious, spontaneous, and compelling, an experience that can touch anyone.[25] As Giddens observes, such a refined conception

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[18] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[19] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.
[20] Yoko Kanemasa, Jun Taniguchi, Ikuo Daibo, and Masayuki Ishimori, "Love Styles and Romantic Love Experiences in Japan," *Social Behaviour and Personality* (2004): 265–282.
[21] Christopher Ash, "Christianity and Sexuality," *Christ on Campus Initiative*, September 20, 2013, https://christoncampuscci.org/christianity-and-sexuality/.
[22] Clive S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[23] Sally N. Vaughn, "Saint Anselm and His Students Writing about Love: A Theological Foundation for the Rise of Romantic Love in Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2010): 54–73.
[24] Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
[25] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.

of love is a distinctive feature of European cultural and intellectual traditions. This enduring dualism, characterized by the tension between the sublime and the carnal, love and desire, was profoundly shaped by Christianity and literature.[26] Love can be seen as a feeling that turns toward another person, guided by care and by a wish to see the beloved happy. Desire, on the other hand, is centered on the self and driven by the search for pleasure and satisfaction. While desire seeks to possess, love aims to connect and give. True love requires self-restraint, turning desire into something that uplifts rather than consumes. In the European sense, the tension between love and desire becomes creative instead of destructive.[27]

This distinctive conception of romantic love was first articulated in Europe during the twelfth century with the emergence of courtly love,[28] a medieval ideal that emphasized devotion and the ennobling power of affection. At its core the belief that a man's passion for a woman was not merely a subjective emotion but a noble force capable of improving both the individual and the society. Initially, this refined form of passion was believed to exist only within aristocratic circles, hence why it became known as courtly love.[29]

From the twelfth century onward, the association between love and court life became a recurring theme across medieval European literature, appearing in Provençal, French, Italian, and even Middle English texts from the earliest vernacular poets through the fourteenth century.[30] Central to this development were the *trobairitz* (female poets) and *troubadours* (male poets) of southern France, who sang of *fin'amors*, often translated as "true love" or "refined love." In their poetry, love was not portrayed as mere desire, but as an elevating and transformative experience, capable of enriching the human condition.[31]

Influenced by the contemporary cult of the Virgin Mary, many troubadours even renounced physical contact with the women they adored, framing love as an act of spiritual devotion.[32] As the troubadour Giraut de Borneil (1138-1215) expressed, the mastery of desire through romantic love brought forth a joy "a hundred times greater" than the fulfillment of desire alone. His perspective spread rapidly across medieval Europe, profoundly transforming how love was imagined and idealized. The creation of courtly love thus marks a pivotal moment in European cultural history, one

[26] Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
[27] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[28] Shirley Robin Letwin, "Romantic Love and Christianity," *Philosophy* 52 (1977): 131–145.
[29] Clive S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[30] Joan M. Ferrante, "Cortes' Amor in Medieval Texts," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 686–695.
[31] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[32] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.

in which devotion, refinement, and intensity became central to the very the understanding of romantic love.[33]

While the Church itself did not hold sexual passion or women in particular high regard,[34] it promoted an ideal of *caritas* (implying "spiritual and selfless love") as the only form truly worthy of divine approval. Marriage, elevated to the status of sacrament, was closely tied to duty, purity, and the sublimation of desire and earthly love was valued only if it reflected divine love.[35]

Within this broad cultural and geographical context, there were figures who articulated a clearer vision of romantic love. Building upon the ideals of courtly love, Andreas Capellanus (1150-1220 AD), a twelfth century cleric, offered one of the earliest reflections in his treatise *De Amore* ("About Love"), describing love as the source of all that is good, as long as it is freely chosen and guided by virtue rather than desire. For Capellanus, true love improves the soul through loyalty and moral discipline: if the beloved does not respond of her own free will, then love fails to endeavor its ennobling effect. In other words, if love is not free, it is not love.[36]

Similarly, Saint Anselm of Aosta (1033-1109 AD), later Abbot of Bec and Archbishop of Canterbury, and his fellow monks adhered firmly to the earlier romantic ideal of ennobling love, which was mainly expressed in non-physical language. Nevertheless, Anselm applied these principles to married life, teaching that husbands should love their wives as much as they love themselves, consider their well-being and entertain no suspicion or ill will towards them. Wives, in turn, were expected to be loving and supportive, encouraging figures who were supposed to calm down their husbands when needed. In this way, marital love was seen as mutual: each partner's duties toward the other helped improve and strengthen both individuals and marriage, exemplifying the transformative potential of romantic love.[37]

These spiritualized romantic ideals deeply shaped the imagination of later authors, with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) serving as a notable precursor to the Renaissance. In the *Divina Commedia* ("Divine Comedy"), Dante reinterprets and elevates the legacy of courtly love, portraying love not as a poetic convention but as a path toward spiritual transformation.[38] Beatrice, his beloved, is no longer just a source of inspiration or a distant figure of admiration; she becomes a symbol of divine wisdom

[33] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[34] Clive S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[35] Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
[36] Clive S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[37] Sally N. Vaughn, "Saint Anselm and His Students Writing about Love: A Theological Foundation for the Rise of Romantic Love in Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2010): 54–73.
[38] Joan M. Ferrante, "Cortes' Amor in Medieval Texts," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 686–695.

and grace, guiding Dante from human reason, represented by Virgil, to divine understanding. In this way, Dante's masterpiece connected the earthly devotion of *fin'amors* with the Christian ideal of caritas, transforming love in a spiritual pilgrimage.[39] In this way, The *Divina Commedia* marked a turning point in the representation of women and romantic love itself.[40]

Following Dante, the Renaissance marked a period of extraordinary cultural renewal in which love became a central theme of creative expression. Thinkers and poets of the time redefined romantic love, moving beyond the idealized devotion of the Middle Ages toward a new approach that valued joy, mutual affection, and spiritual connection between men and women. During this period, women's status began to improve, as some gained access to education in languages and in the arts, and marriage increasingly started to be seen as a union requiring the consent of both partners rather than a purely family arrangement.[41] The rediscovery of classical texts, especially Plato's (428-347 BC) *Symposium*, also shaped Renaissance ideas about love by reintroducing the concept of soulmates and the belief in a bond that unites body and spirit. These ideas spread widely across Europe, influencing literature and reshaping ideals.

Though separated by time and context, William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) vision of love reflects the same classical-Christian worldview that had shaped Dante's era: a synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy, Christian theology, and the allegorical reading of ancient and biblical traditions. In Shakespeare's writings, this moral and spiritual tradition transforms into a human-centered vision, making love both a duty and a powerful experience. In his works, this synthesis finds a new expression: love becomes a mystery that reveals itself suddenly and irresistibly, demanding devotion and faith in the beloved.[42] Yet, unlike earlier medieval definitions, Shakespeare's vision integrates love and marriage, making tenderness, desire, and affection legitimate parts of a shared life. In his view, romantic love was the true foundation of a relationship, and a love declaration was equivalent to a marriage proposal. His protagonists often fall in love at first sight, refraining from passion until they have pledged faith one another. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often called "the age of Shakespeare," love thus emerged as both an ennobling ideal and a force that binds human freedom to emotional and moral commitment.[43]

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[39] Francis Fergusson, "Romantic Love in Dante and Shakespeare," *The Sewanee Review* 83 (1975): 253–266.
[40] Maria Teresa Martuscelli and Michele Cavallo, "Lacan e Dante: Un dialogo," La Psicoanalisi 69 (2021): 130, http://www.psicoanalisiartesocieta.com/lacan-e-dante-psicoanalisi-e-divina-commedia/.
[41] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[42] Francis Fergusson, "Romantic Love in Dante and Shakespeare," *The Sewanee Review* 83 (1975): 253–266.
[43] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).

Through the global spread of the English language and culture, this model influenced how the entire Anglophone world imagined love. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europe was marked by Rationalism and The Enlightenment, people seeking happiness, increased pleasure, and reduced pain. This approach to life was not considered to be selfish or immoral, it simply wanted to promote well-being and harmony for as many people as possible.[44] New moral and philosophical ideals encouraged the belief that marriage should be based on affection rather than on family alliances or economic interests. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), positioned between The Enlightenment's rationalism and the emerging Romantic sensibility, developed in his work *Émile, ou De l'éducation* ("Emile, or On Education") a conception of love that united morality, reason, and authentic emotions. In his view, love begins as a natural, instinctive attraction, but it must be guided by reason and virtue to reach its highest form. The ideal relationship, designed between the main characters Émile and Sophie, represents a progression of the heart alongside the mind, showing how true affection can balance desire and duty and turn passion into a moral feeling that supports both personal happiness and social harmony.[45]

But every action has an equal and opposite reaction and, by the late eighteenth century, Romanticism emerged as a response to the rationalism and moral restraint of The Enlightenment, celebrating emotions, impulses, and individuality, and portraying love as a powerful, sometimes self-destructive and liberating force.[46]

Romantic authors focused on intuition, intense emotions, and the dramatization and idealization of life. Love naturally became the central theme, depicted as a deeply personal, passionate, and idealized experience. Romantic love echoed courtly love in fusing sensuality with purity, yet it introduced a new range of feelings and expressions with sexual love becoming a symbol of divine love, touching on the ultimate mysteries of life. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* ("The Sorrows of Young Werther") stands as an emblematic example of this shift. His epistolary novel not only transformed sentimental paradigms inherited from The Enlightenment literature but also opened new ways of exploring subjectivity, presenting love as a force capable of validating and defining the self.[47]

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[44] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[45] Nancy Yousef, "Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and the Revision of Romantic Subjectivity," *Studies in Romanticism* 38 (1999): 537–557.
[46] Herbert L. Stewart, "Theology and Romanticism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 13 (1920): 362–389.
[47] Edgar Landgraf, "Romantic Love and the Enlightenment: From Gallantry and Seduction to Authenticity and Self-Validation," *The German Quarterly* 77 (2004): 29–46.

Unlike courtly love, which was described as an elevated and transformative experience, capable of enriching the human condition without allowing physical desire to control one's actions and beliefs, Romantic love, shaping what we now recognize as the contemporary ideal of romance, celebrated immediate, passionate feelings and often broke social norms.[48] Romantic literature also reshaped social dynamics between men and women, portraying them as individuals guided by their own values: choosing a partner hence became an act of self-fulfillment, reflecting both authentic desire and individual freedom. In this way, love became not only a form of self-expression but also a transformative force, redefining intimacy and human connection in European societies.[49] In closing, it is worth mentioning that the author Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) suggested the presence of a "Christian inclination" in Romantic theory as well, implying that even within the movement's intense spiritualism and sublimation, in Italy its aesthetics remained closely connected to unfaltering Catholic Church traditions in the nation's creative and intellectual life.[50]

[48] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[49] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[50] Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).

On Love Practices According to Shinto

If thou follow thy star, thou canst not fail of a glorious heaven. – Dante

On the coast of Futami, near the city of Ise in Japan, two rocks rise sharply from the sea, standing just a short distance from the shore. A large rope, called a *shimenawa* (しめ縄, lit. "enclosing rope"), binds them together as if in marriage. This pair of rocks, known as Meoto Iwa, or "the Wedded Rocks", never fails to capture the hearts of visitors.[51] A small torii crowns the larger rock, while a second, larger gate on the beach frames the view of the two. Scattered along the shore are countless images of frogs, animals considered sacred to this place. The Japanese word for frog, *kaeru* (蛙), is a homonym for the verb meaning "to return home" (帰る), symbolizing safety, reunion, and the comfort of belonging.[52] Looking upon the Meoto Iwa, one might feel a sense of tenderness or quiet reverence. The sight evokes the idea of an everlasting bond: two beings joined together, standing steadfast through centuries of waves and time. These rocks, once merely natural formations, were transformed by the emergence of Shinto belief. Through Shinto, they became a sacred representation of the deities Izanagi and Izanami, the primordial *kami* who, according to Japanese mythology, created the islands of Japan and gave life to the world.[53] This image can be seen as a visual representation of love, reflecting the harmony between the spiritual and the natural that lies at the heart of Shinto thought. To understand how such an idea has shaped Japanese conceptions of love and romantic relationships, it is necessary to begin with a short definition of Shinto.

A Short History of Shinto

Defining Shinto is far from simple. Rather than a single, codified religion, Shinto is better understood as a complex and evolving phenomenon deeply rooted in Japanese culture and history.[54] In academic discussions, it is often described in ways that highlight this diversity: some scholars called it "a cluster of folk beliefs and practices" and "a set of loosely connected superstitions," and

[51] Sokyo Ono, "Shinto Symbols," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 7 (1966): 3–39.
[52] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[53] Xiaofei Tu and Wendy Xie, "The Kojiki/Nihon Shoki Mythology and Chinese Mythology: Theme, Structure, and Meaning," *Religions* 12 (2021): 1–20.
[54] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.

survey data often supports this view, showing that Shinto could be indeed seen as nonreligious in the conventional sense.[55] On the other hand, many intellectuals define Shinto as an animistic Japanese religion originated in preliterate times,[56] developed from the ancient Japanese awe of the mysterious and supernatural rather than from the teachings of a single founder.[57] Shinto myths of creation and the country's foundation tale have been preserved through oral traditions until they were written down in the early eighth century in two chronicles, the *Kojiki* (古事記, "Records of Ancient Matters") and *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, "The Chronicles of Japan"). These texts recount *kami* tales and describe how the Japanese archipelago (and, by extension, the world) was created through their actions.[58]

Shinto holds a central place in Japan's religious history, yet its nature has often been regarded as ambiguous and elusive. In its most recognizable form, Shinto is associated with shrines, which range from small local sanctuaries to major religious centers. These shrines are distinguished from Buddhist temples by their characteristic architecture and by their role as places of worship for countless *kami*.[59] Over time, Shinto mythology and practices were also influenced by religious cults from China and Korean peninsula, adding further layers to its ever-evolving character.[60]

The earliest forms of Shinto are largely unknown, but scholars have made some conjectures and assumed it might be linked to Jomon period religious practices centered on fertility and contemporary mythology, however people of the time left no written records.[61] By the Yayoi period, villages were already organized into clan-like groups called *uji*, each of them devoted to its own guardian deity, or *ujigami*.[62] Archaeological findings indicate that they had already developed hierarchical social structures, with leaders holding both political and religious authority. Ancient Japanese people were likely animists, believing in spirits present in both nature and human life: all manifestations of nature were believed to possess a sentient existence, holding some kind of divine presence within themselves, and were venerated accordingly.[63] To ward off harmful spirits and attract positive ones they used amulets and, through shamanistic practices similar to those found in Siberia and in the Korean peninsula, they believed they were able to communicate with spirits.[64]

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[55] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[56] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[57] Stephen O. Canter, *Shintō and Buddhism: The Japanese Homogeneous Blend* (Trinity Baptist College, 2011).
[58] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[59] John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
[60] Stephen O. Canter, *Shintō and Buddhism: The Japanese Homogeneous Blend* (Trinity Baptist College, 2011).
[61] Stephen O. Canter, *Shintō and Buddhism: The Japanese Homogeneous Blend* (Trinity Baptist College, 2011).
[62] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[63] Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, "The Land of Natural Affirmation: Pre-Buddhist Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 21 (1966): 203–209.
[64] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

Although each shrine usually enshrines a very specific *kami*, they all belong to the same divine realm.[65] In Shinto, *kami* are not perceived as distant gods, instead they are forces embedded in the world itself. They include natural phenomena such as wind, thunder, mountains, rivers, rocks, and trees, as well as qualities of fertility and growth, certain animals, and ancestral spirits. Many of these deities are still believed to grant earthly wishes, health, protection, prosperity, or success, reflecting Shinto's enduring connection to everyday life.

Another distinctive feature of *kami* is their familial nature, as they are often depicted as belonging to divine households that mirror human relationships and emotions. Interestingly, women hold meaningful positions within this pantheon: the sun goddess Amaterasu stands at its apex, and the legitimacy of the Japanese imperial dynasty, the longest hereditary line in history, traces back to her divine descent.[66] Moreover, some *kami* are said to have once been mortal, burdened by sorrow or separation from loved ones, suggesting a strong connection between human life and the divine world.[67] Central to this human-divine dynamic is the idea of a pure heart and mind, called *makoto no kokoro* (誠の心), or simply *magokoro*, which implies authenticity and the intrinsic idea that if a person is spiritually pure, they can sense the supernatural. By being receptive to *kami*, they can realize that the deities are not separate from them, on the contrary, they already are part of who they are; an interesting concept that will get reinterpreted throughout the centuries and will appear in later chapters as well.[68]

Over time, political and cultural developments gave Shinto a more defined institutional form. It became closely linked to the imperial family, the network of shrines, and the emerging sense of national identity. Efforts that helped distinguish Shinto from Buddhism while also making it a shared heritage for Japanese people.[69] The very term Shintō (神道), was adopted in the eight century to distinguish Japan's indigenous practices from Butsudō (仏道), "the Way of the Buddha" and it is usually translated as "the Way of the Gods."[70] Yet, despite these efforts to define and formalize it, Shinto remains in many respects resistant to precise classification.

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[65] John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
[66] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[67] Haruko Wakita and David P. Phillips, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie' in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* (1993): 85–105.
[68] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[69] John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
[70] Stephen O. Canter, *Shintō and Buddhism: The Japanese Homogeneous Blend* (Trinity Baptist College, 2011).

At its core, Shinto may be described as an animistic and polytheistic form of nature worship, deeply intertwined with ancestor veneration. The forces of nature are personified and revered, while ancestors and legendary figures, particularly those of the imperial line, are deified in the form of *kami*. For this dissertation, it may be regarded in general terms as the Japanese analogue of ancient European pagan traditions.[71] For many centuries, Shinto lied in reverence, gratitude, and loyalty toward both the natural world and the imperial institutions, uniting religion and national identity. This spirit, often referred to as Yamato-damashii (大和魂, lit. "the Spirit of Japan"), profoundly shaped not only the nation's sense of harmony and order but also its fundamental perception of existence itself.[72] Shinto also reveals some problematic aspects, particularly during the prewar and wartime periods, when these ideas were used to strengthen national identity and promote nationalism.[73] However, a full discussion of these developments goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

The First Union Portrayed

As previously mentioned, there is virtually no written record of the earliest religious developments in Japan. As a result, there are few alternative ways to analyze social romantic practices and definitions of love in a society where written sources are extremely scarce. For this reason, as a primary point of reference, this chapter turns to the *Kojiki* and to its representations of love and intimacy.[74] Completed in 712 AD, the *Kojiki* is the earliest text of unquestionable authenticity.[75] It gives detailed stories of Japan's mythic, preliterate period, covering Japan's origins up to the imperial rulers of the sixth century. Written mainly in Japanese, which was just developing a written form, it could be read by very few people at that time.[76]

In this chronicle, the early Japanese worldview was characterized by a natural and positive affirmation of life and of the world. There was no sense of a separate, transcendent realm opposed to human reality; instead, the divine realm and the human world were perceived as interconnected. The land of Yamato, the present world (葦原の中つ国, *Ashihara no Nakatsukuni*, lit. "The middle country of reed beds"), and the supernatural realms were all conceived as existing within a single, continuous

[71] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[72] August Karl Reischauer, *Studies in Japanese Buddhism* (New York: MacMillan, 1917).
[73] Wilbur M. Fridell, "A Fresh Look at State Shinto," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976): 547–561.
[74] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[75] Stephen O. Canter, *Shintō and Buddhism: The Japanese Homogeneous Blend* (Trinity Baptist College, 2011).
[76] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

reality.[77] In this early vision, the world was seen as inherently good and complete, a land conceived to be perfect as it is. Human beings and nature shared the same sacred essence, and suffering and moral corruption were not viewed as fixed or eternal, they were just perceived as disturbances that could be resolved.[78]

The *Kojiki* is composed of three fascicles, a tripartite structure that reflects the progression from the divine to the human. The first fascicle describes the world of *kami* and the origins of existence. The second depicts a world inhabited by both gods and humans, showing their interactions. The third one turns to the world of humans, narrating the deeds of legendary emperors and other historical figures.[79] Although the *Kojiki* became the most important written source of Shinto, it cannot be regarded as a "sacred" text in the sense of the Bible in Judeo-Christian tradition or the Qur'an in Islam. This is because, as previously discussed, Shinto itself can hardly be defined as a "religion" in the conventional sense.[80] Rather than serving as a moral guide for belief or conduct, the *Kojiki* preserves myths, genealogies, and narratives that reflect how early Japanese society understood existence, human relationships, and the enduring bond between *kami* and humans.

Among its central narratives is the story of the two deities Izanagi no Mikoto (伊耶那岐命, lit. "He-who-invites") and Izanami no Mikoto (伊耶那美命, lit. "She-who-invites"), who, through sexual intercourse, produce the islands of Japan and a multitude of other *kami*.[81] This is not just a cosmogony tale: the myth of Izanagi and Izanami reflects in fact early Shinto views of creation and connection, showing reproduction and life's continuation as natural parts of the world's order, presenting one of the most well-known accounts of divine creation.

Descending from the heavens to the newly formed island, the two deities erected a heavenly pillar and built a spacious palace. At this moment, Izanagi asked his spouse, Izanami: "How is your body formed?" She replied, "My body, formed though it be formed, has one place which is formed insufficiently." Izanagi responded, "My body, formed though it be formed, has one place which is formed to excess. Therefore, I would like to take that place in my body which is formed to excess and

[77] Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, "The Land of Natural Affirmation: Pre-Buddhist Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 21 (1966): 203–209.
[78] Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, "The Land of Natural Affirmation: Pre-Buddhist Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 21 (1966): 203–209.
[79] Masahiro Taniguchi, "The Kojiki's Worldview: Entangled Worlds of Gods and Humans," *Kokugakuin Japan Studies* 1 (2020): 5–24.
[80] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[81] Masahiro Taniguchi, "The Kojiki's Worldview: Entangled Worlds of Gods and Humans," *Kokugakuin Japan Studies* 1 (2020): 5–24.

insert it into that place in your body which is formed insufficiently, and give birth to the land. How would this be?" To this, Izanami answered in agreement: "That will be good." They then resolved to walk around the heavenly pillar and meet to perform the act of conjugal union.[82]

This passage reflects early Japanese conceptions of gender and social order: the agreement between the two "lonely" deities concerning their union, as highlighted by Takó, very likely mirrors the social customs of the age in which the text was compiled. Sexual union is hence portrayed as an agreement between the two sexes grounded in mutual consent, suggesting an early recognition of a structured relational order between men and women.[83] The focus of the narrative is on the physical act and what it produces: the birth of land and deities.[84] The scene contains no reference to "love" in an emotional or romantic sense aside from brief remarks concerning the *kami* appearances, which may be interpreted as a gesture of acknowledgment or attraction; there is no indication of affection between the two *kami*. Another strong indicator of gender dynamics and relational order appears in the next scene, where Izanami speaks first after walking around the pillar. Her action is treated as improper and the failed birth that follows is explained as a result of this reversal of roles. Only when they repeat the ritual with Izanagi speaking first the union does succeed and the children are born healthy, probably reflecting a male-centered dynamic of that time in which the man was expected to lead.[85]

To better understand the absence of romantic love within this interaction, it helps to consider how sexuality itself was understood in this context. Unlike in European traditions, where desire has often been linked to sin, such as in the story of Adam and Eve becoming aware of their nakedness, sexual intercourse in Japan was not treated as inherently sinful or shameful. In Shinto thought, what might appear akin to Christian sin is better understood as *tsumi* (罪, lit. "defilement"). This concept does not imply wrongdoings or ill intentions; rather, it refers to a temporary condition of impurity that arises from contact with polluting elements, such as blood, death, or diseases. As it is often unavoidable, it requires purification rather than forgiveness: the emphasis here lying on restoring spiritual cleanliness rather than judging moral failure.[86]

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[82] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[83] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[84] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[85] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[86] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

Within this context, the union of the two deities is portrayed not as an expression of a romantic feeling, but as a natural and necessary act of creation, fully integrated into the world's order.[87] This is deeply connected to the Japanese conception of human existence as composed of *mi* (身, body) and *tama* (魂, soul), in which physical and spiritual dimensions are deeply interconnected. In this context, the distinction between sexual desire and love or romantic affection was irrelevant, and sexual repression not a cultural concern. Sexual activity could even be interpreted as a way of maintaining harmony with *kami*, as long as it remained within the boundaries of ritual purity.[88]

According to ancient beliefs, sexual encounters were perceived as a form of sacred magic: they enhanced women's fertility and men's virility, bringing prosperity not only to the individuals involved but to the community as well. In this context, sexual acts were not tied to romantic love, since exclusivity or attachment between partners was not expected. However, these acts were considered sacred, elevated through their association with the divine: they took place in the presence of, and with the blessing of, one or more *kami*, and were therefore idealized. Sex was thus celebrated and symbolically connected not to love but to purity and fertility. Many ancient rituals incorporated sexual intercourse as a means of engaging with deities. In practice, human participants often replaced the gods themselves: sex in shrines or ritualized encounters between men and women became a sacred offering, celebrating fertility, divine blessing, and the prosperity of the village. Outside of religious contexts, sexual encounters between partners were similarly institutionalized and ritualized.[89]

In the world of *iro* (色, implying "sensual love"), erotic activity was an expression of the sacred and at the same time a physical desire which impacted on the village's wellbeing: it was intimately tied to the individual's vitality, the community's growth, and Japan itself.[90] In this sense, the union of Izanami and Izanagi was closely tied to the flow of life, seen as a natural and necessary part of the world rather than something driven by romantic emotions or affection.[91]

To cite a few more examples from the *Kojiki*, two additional stories are particularly relevant, as they already show romantic practices that will be further developed in later works, such as *Genji*

[87] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[88] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[89] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[90] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[91] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.

Monogatari, a work that will include not only these early narrative patterns but also later influences from Buddhism and Confucianism and will be used as a reference in the following chapter.

The first legend tells of Emperor Nintoku, whose wife was so consumed by jealousy that no concubines were allowed near the imperial palace. Despite this, Nintoku summoned Princess Kuro, renowned for her beauty, to become his concubine. Terrified of the empress's wrath, the princess fled before the affair could even begin. In this tale what unquestionably stands out the most is that Nintoku's behavior is never portrayed as immoral or blameworthy. Instead, the story turns its attention to the empress's jealousy and the emperor's quiet sorrow and deep longing. The focus lies not on moral judgment, but on the portrayal of human feelings like desire, envy, and the pain of separation, presented as natural parts of human emotions rather than sins or transgressions.[92]

The second story focuses on the journey of the god Yatipoko (better known as Ōkuninushi), who traveled to the distant netherworld (根の国, Ne-no-kuni, lit. "Land of roots"), in search of a new companion. There he encountered the beautiful Nunakapa-hime (also known as Suseri-hime). Following ancient customs, he stood before her home and courted her by reciting a poem, proudly presenting himself and describing the long journey he had made to reach her. Nunakapa-hime responded with equal grace, eagerly awaiting his evening visits and promising, through her own poems, the pleasures of love and the acceptance of his own feelings. In this story, the roles are once again clearly defined: the man as the pursuer, the woman as the awaiting beloved. Nunakapa-hime does not require a pledge of fidelity, yet her words convey devotion and reciprocal interest.[93] Follows an extract from the poetry exchange between the two deities, from Nunakapa-hime's side:

> Yatipoko, Deity lord. I am a woman – feeble grass. My heart is a bird of the creek. Right now (I) may be a free bird of its own, later your bird I will be. Don't lose (your) life. Restless, running in heavens – story, told story, these are the words (of the story). When the sun hides under the dark mountain, jade gems night will come. Come, smiling like the morning sun. (You) will embrace and intertwine (with your) white arms, like mulberry ropes, (my) young breast like flaky snow. Hands like jewels, (your) hands like jewels, will entwine (with mine). Stretch (your) legs, sleep leisurely. Do not yearn so loudly, Yatipoko, Deity lord. Story, told story, these are the words (of the story).[94]

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[92] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[93] Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1968).
[94] Ekaterina Levchenko, "Rhetorical Devices in Old Japanese Verse: Structural Analysis and Semantics. Part II: From Semantics to Hermeneutics," *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* 30 (2017): 109–127.

The exchange of poems between the two lovers is a key element highlighting the profound role that poetry already held in the gender dynamics and in the social life of early Japan. To compose and recite verse was not merely a sign of eloquence, it was an essential expedient to express affection, desire, and sincerity. These poetical exchanges, with their clear roles and ritualized courtship styles, turned language itself into a medium to express reciprocal interest, reflecting patterns of ancient "romantic" interaction that will continue for centuries.[95]

The same sensibility is evident in ancient practices such as the *utagaki* (歌垣, lit. "poetry gatherings"), frequently mentioned in early records, which seem to have originated in Kofun period, reaching their peak only during Nara period. These seasonal festivals, held in spring and autumn, brought men and women together to improvise verses in friendly contests. Though few of these preliterate poems survive, descriptions suggest that the poetry exchanges were open, playful, and at times boldly sensual, often serving as preludes to sexual intercourse.[96] This perspective aligns with what scholars describe as a form of "sexual worship" in ancient Japan; since myths often celebrated fertility and harmony between the two genders, it is very likely that, in ancient times, sexual union was actively endorsed.[97]

The *utagaki* reflect a world in which sexuality was embraced as a natural aspect of life, and in which poetry functioned as a primary language for expressing affection, desire, and human connection.[98] These practices developed within a very different social order from those of later periods. Before the seventh century, young men after marriage often moved into their wives' households and came under the authority of their fathers-in-law. Sexual and marital relations were therefore apparently not yet strictly organized around male lineage or exclusive marital bonds. Only with the introduction of Chinese-style legal codes in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the creation of an imperial bureaucracy modeled on them, a clear preference for patrilineal descent started to take shape.[99]

Shinto emphasis on natural and sexual union seems to have persisted beneath the surface in later centuries as well. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, figures such as the Shinto preacher

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[95] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[96] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[97] Xinran Xie, "The Impact of the Research on *The Tale of Genji* on Contemporary Society: Interpretation of the Two Dimensions of *The Tale of Genji*," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 586 (2021): 968–970.
[98] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[99] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Masuho Zankō (1655–1742) lamented the decline of affection between husband and wife and stressed that sexual relations formed both the foundation of morality and the pinnacle of personal intimacy. For Zankō, who had a strong Shinto-imbued perspective, marital love was central not only to private happiness but also to social and cosmic order.[100]

Three hundred years later, this perspective resonates in a slightly different way in contemporary practices: Shinto's combined emphasis on purity and fertility is still present and makes this religion particularly adaptable to the celebration of marriage, reflecting the enduring connection between purity, nature, gender dynamics, and Shinto spiritual ideals.[101]

The Man'yōshū and Its Romantic Practices

Once again, in the absence of other literary sources that directly analyze social life in early Japan, it becomes necessary to rely on poetic materials to reconstruct everyday practices and forms of interpersonal interaction between men and women. Poetry offers one of the few surviving spaces in which social practices and sensibilities that can be described as romantic appear with any clarity in the interactions of Nara period Japanese people.

One of the most important sources in this regard is the *Man'yōshū* (万葉集, lit. "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves"), the earliest major anthology of Japanese poetry, compiled in the eighth century.[102] It includes *kayō*, the oldest Japanese verse, rooted in vocal and musical performance, and it implicitly suggests that, in Nara Japan, feelings were expressed in shared, communal settings rather than kept as private personal experiences. Their sound patterns were marked by irregular syllabic construction and a division into stanzas, while their content featured abundant use of parallelism, repetitions, and refrains.[103] In these early poems, the main concern was not whether love brought happiness or sorrow, but rather how the individual defined himself or herself through the experience of love.[104]

The love *kayō* expressed emotions and sensual desires that arose spontaneously and naturally, once again reflecting Shinto's unrestrained attitude toward human feelings. Eroticism was regarded as a

[100] Jennifer Preston, "Allegories of Love," *Japan Review* 26 (2013): 117–135.
[101] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[102] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[103] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[104] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.

fundamental human impulse, an honest expression of a desire for physical union between a man and a woman. Additionally, one of the most common motifs found throughout the love *kayō* was that of *tsumadoi* (妻問い, lit. "searching for a wife"), a topos closely connected to the polygamous nature of early Japanese relationships that we will find in later chapters as well.[105]

Alongside this, many poems hint at real-life wedding customs. A notable example is the theme of *nanori* (名乗り, lit. "telling each other's names"), in which a man finally introduces himself by giving his full name while asking the woman for hers: her reply suggesting that she accepts his proposal.[106] An example of *nanori* practice appears in the first poem of the *Man'yōshū*, attributed to Emperor Yūryaku (r. 456-479 AD).

> Your basket, with your pretty basket,
> Your trowel, with your little trowel,
> Maiden, picking herbs on this hill-side,
> I would ask you: Where is your home?
> Will you not tell me your name?
> Over the spacious Land of Yamato
> It is I who reign so wide and far,
> It is I who rule so wide and far.
> I myself, as your lord, will tell you
> Of my home, and my name.[107]

Such scenes reveal how courtship and marriage practices were woven naturally into poetic expression, further emphasizing the intimate connection between everyday life, love practices, and the Shinto views of nature and fertility.

Interestingly, Nara Japanese language had multiple words for love and longing, each carrying its own emotional shade. Among them the most common term was *koi* (恋, "love as sorrow"), which carried a powerful longing shaped by absence and intense emotions. Early works frequently wrote the term as *kohi* (孤悲), where *ko* suggests loneliness and *hi* conveys sorrow or yearning. Together,

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[105] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[106] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[107] Special Man'yōshū Committee of the Japanese Classics Translation Committee, trans., *The Man'yōshū: The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai Translation of One Thousand Poems*, foreword by Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969)

the characters evoke a bittersweet form of desire rooted in a nostalgic ache: a yearning for someone distant, unreachable, or maybe even lost. This sense of bittersweet longing appears frequently not only in the *Man'yōshū* but also in the poetry and romantic tales of the following Heian period.[108] Noteworthily, the *Man'yōshū* alone contains the word *koi* roughly eight hundred times,[109] demonstrating how central this feeling of longing was to the poetic imagination of ancient times. It is important to note that, in early anthologies, *koi* encompassed a wide spectrum of meanings. It referred to personal and, at the same time, interpersonal affection, ranging from emotional yearning to physical desire, without drawing sharp boundaries between the sensual aspects and the emotional involvement.[110] In this sense, its semantic range resembles the early Western term *amour*, which likewise did not distinguish between spiritual attachment and physical passion.[111]

Origuchi Shinobu traces the origin of *koi* to the compound *tamagoi* (魂乞い, lit. "inviting the soul"), a notion that comes from ancient Japanese religious beliefs. In these traditions, *tamagoi* symbolized a sacred act between two people who cared for each other, rooted in the older *tama-yobai* (魂呼ばい, lit. "soul-calling") ritual. After a person's death, it was believed that the soul wandered restlessly, and a loved one would need to call it out to guide it back. In the compound *tamagoi*, this act became a metaphor for love, representing two people calling one another and seeking some kind of connection. The gesture suggested an interpretation of love as both a spiritual and physical connection, showing how in Japanese thought, even in its earliest expressions, desire and longing were closely linked.[112]

Taken together, these examples show how Shinto shaped early Japanese understandings of romantic practices and desire. Because sexuality was closely linked to nature and the divine world, it rarely required moral justification. Physical desire and longing were seen as interconnected and inseparable aspects of human life and of the natural and sacred order. This unity lays the basis of later literary works like the *Genji Monogatari*, and reflects the long-lasting influence of Shinto on cultural

[108] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[109] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[110] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[111] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[112] Shinobu Origuchi (折口信夫), *Origuchi Shinobu Zenshū* (*折口信夫全集*) (Tokyo 東京: Chūō Kōronsha 中央公論社, 1966).

ideas of affection, desire, and most importantly men-women dynamics.[113] Love as a clearly defined personal or emotional bond does not yet fully appear, emerging only later under new religious and philosophical influences.[114]

At the same time, the scarcity of historical sources makes it difficult to determine how people truly lived and loved in these early periods. Many of these interpretations therefore remain scholars educated guesses, based on the assumption that the presence of certain practices and expressions in ancient literature suggests that similar patterns may also have existed in early Japanese society.

[113] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[114] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.

The Entrance of Buddhism and its Emotional Impact

If the present world has gone astray, in you is the cause, and in you let it be sought. – Dante

As Asuka and Nara period religious and literary environment did not offer extensive representations of affection or romantic love, it becomes necessary to continue this journey by entering a time where written Japanese was beginning to take shape and native Japanese literature was gradually becoming part of the cultural life of the Heian court elite. By following the love adventures of the Shining Prince, this dissertation continues to explore romantic portrayals that may shed light on the shaping of romantic love in contemporary Japan. The *Genji Monogatari* offers quite a few opportunities to reflect on these portrayals, and to consider what, if anything, might constitute a true definition of romantic love. Is it maybe the sudden recognition of a soulmate, as Genji seems to find in young Murasaki?[115] Is it the tender affection the prince feels for the fragile Yūgao, which leaves him vulnerable and unable to accept her loss?[116] Is it the burning jealousy of Lady Rokujō, who cannot bear the idea of not being the only woman he will ever love?[117] Or is it Genji's own lingering regret, as he realizes that in every woman he has sought an unattainable ideal, turning romantic love into an endless search that can never fully satisfy him?[118] Even if answers will remain uncertain and incomplete, limited by the focus on a single author within a much broader literary landscape, it is important to recognize that the *Genji Monogatari* still offers one of the earliest and most meaningful portrayals of romantic love in Japanese cultural history.

To fully understand how such reflections on love and affection could emerge, however, it is essential to consider the wider intellectual and religious transformations that were reshaping Japan during those centuries. In the sixth century, both Confucianism and Buddhism arrived in Japan from China through the Korean peninsula.[119] Since their introduction, these two philosophical thoughts

[115] Anita Fike, *Women in Ambiguity: Fictitious Monogamy in Genji Monogatari* (Master's thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 2017).
[116] James McMullen, *Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[117] Anita Fike, *Women in Ambiguity: Fictitious Monogamy in Genji Monogatari* (Master's thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 2017).
[118] James McMullen, *Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[119] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.

played essential roles in shaping Japanese culture and, although the influence of Confucianism would emerge more strongly in later centuries, Buddhism's presence was immediately felt.[120]

Buddhist teachings already had clear doctrines and written texts long before their arrival in Japan. When they encountered Shinto practices, which were mostly constituted by myths and rituals, to better fit within this new environment, Buddhist monks adapted their ideas to fit with the *kami* worship. Through this process, Buddhism spread by providing new teachings, ideas, and rituals that, in turn, helped organize and explain native beliefs, shaping the way people practiced both Buddhism and *kami* worship.[121]

A Short History of Buddhism

Originating in India with the birth of the Buddha in the sixth century BC, Buddhism had already become one of Asia's major religions by the time it reached Japan.[122] As it spread from India to China, its teachings evolved across centuries and regions, and when Buddhism was introduced to Japan, nearly a thousand years had passed since the Buddha's lifetime. Far from India, the sacred place where his teachings began, early Japanese people feared that this distance might prevent them from reaching salvation: this very fear deepened their faith and strengthened their devotion to the new religion.[123] Back in 1966 Matsunaga hypothesized that the early appeal of Buddhism in Japan had been largely spontaneous. According to her, this early attraction created a desire to grasp the deeper meaning of existence through an intuition that the truth of things was bound to the wholeness of life.[124] In a more recent perspective Maekawa Ken'ichi suggests that Buddhist worship may have evolved from the ritual system of the Kofun period rather than directly replacing native *kami*. Some theories also link Kofun rituals, centered on deification and protection from evil, to early temple functions.[125]

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[120] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[121] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[122] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[123] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[124] Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, "The Land of Natural Affirmation: Pre-Buddhist Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 21 (1966): 203–209.
[125] Ken'ichi Maekawa (前川健一), "Bukkyō wa Nihon de Nani ni Deatta no Ka — Bukkyō Denrai no Saikentō" (*仏教は日本で何に出会ったのか――仏教伝来の再検討*), *Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai Nenpō* (*日本佛教学会年報*) (2021): 1–16.

The introduction of Buddhism to Japan is generally placed in the late Kofun period but it is during the Asuka and Nara periods that, thanks to government support, it rapidly spread. According to the *Nihon Shoki*, Buddhism was officially introduced to the Japanese elite in October 552 AD, during the thirteenth year of Emperor Kinmei's reign (r. 539-571 AD), when King Song Myong of Baekje (r. 523-554 AD) sent envoys to Japan bearing a gilt-bronze image of the Buddha, banners, and Buddhist scriptures.[126] At the time, a debate arose over whether Buddhism should be accepted or abolished. In the *Nihon Shoki* it is said that this conflict pitted the pro-Buddhist Soga no Iname (506-570 AD) against clan chiefs Mononobe no Okoshi (300-538 AD) and Nakatomi no Kamako (? - ?). When an epidemic followed, the anti-Buddhist faction blamed the anger of native *kami*, leading to the burning of Soga's temple and the casting of Buddhist images into the Horie canal at Naniwa, although some scholars suggest that this version may be a later literary construction modeled on Chinese sources.[127]

After some initial resistance, Buddhism gradually became an integral part of Japanese religious life. This process eventually led to the development of *shinbutsu-shūgō* (神仏習合, lit. "syncretism of *kami* and buddhas") and *shinbutsu-konkō* (神仏混淆, lit. "contamination of kami and buddhas"), marking the gradual fusion of native Shinto and foreign Buddhist beliefs into a single, interconnected system.[128] Buddhist ideas began intersecting with Shinto practices, for example the *Nihon Shoki* includes passages suggesting that Buddhas and *kami* were thought to belong to the same category of sacred beings.[129] During the Nara period, when the government actively promoted Buddhism, local shrines started building *jingū-ji*: Buddhist temples erected beside Shinto shrines to help the local *kami* resolve karmic problems.[130] This influence is already visible in Prince Shōtoku's

[126] Ziyi Gu, "Shinbutsu Kakuri: The Phenomenon of Isolation between Gods and Buddhas in the Early Stages of Buddhist Dissemination in Japan," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* (2024): 145–149.
[127] Ken'ichi Maekawa (前川健一), "Bukkyō wa Nihon de Nani ni Deatta no Ka — Bukkyō Denrai no Saikentō" (*仏教は日本で何に出会ったのか――仏教伝来の再検討*), *Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai Nenpō* (*日本佛教学会年報*) (2021): 1–16.
[128] Ziyi Gu, "Shinbutsu Kakuri: The Phenomenon of Isolation between Gods and Buddhas in the Early Stages of Buddhist Dissemination in Japan," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* (2024): 145–149.
[129] Ken'ichi Maekawa (前川健一), "Bukkyō wa Nihon de Nani ni Deatta no Ka — Bukkyō Denrai no Saikentō" (*仏教は日本で何に出会ったのか――仏教伝来の再検討*), *Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai Nenpō* (*日本佛教学会年報*) (2021): 1–16.
[130] Ziyi Gu, "Shinbutsu Kakuri: The Phenomenon of Isolation between Gods and Buddhas in the Early Stages of Buddhist Dissemination in Japan," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* (2024): 145–149.

(r. 593-622 AD) *Seventeen-Article Constitution*, a foundational political and social document in shaped by both Buddhist and Confucian principles.[131]

Although Buddhist doctrine was initially more sophisticated and powerful, capable of influencing local beliefs, the worship of native *kami* did not disappear.[132] Shinto remained a local faith, tied to each clan's connection with their *ujigami*, while Buddhism, with its universal teachings, gradually extended into government dynamics, society, and people's everyday sensibilities.[133]

Love According to Buddhism

By the Heian era, Japan's own culture began to flourish in a clear, independent form. The writing and preservation of Buddhist texts, once reliant on Chinese and Korean sources, now was taking place within Japan itself.[134] During the earlier Ritsuryō state of the eighth century, modeled on the Chinese system, the government tried to organize and control every household and women's social roles also shifted; marriages were often arranged so that husbands lived with, or regularly visited, their wives in their own homes. Most unions were monogamous, though among the aristocracy it was not uncommon for wealthy men to keep several wives, usually with one primary household centered on the first wife.[135] Such arrangements might have shaped the way romantic relationships were understood and represented. Love in fact was frequently portrayed outside marriage, not necessarily as an act of moral defiance but as a reflection of women's particular position within Heian society. Unlike their European counterparts, Heian women enjoyed de facto a relatively wide space for literary expression, turning, with their literary skills, their own experiences into poetry and prose.[136] This freedom helps explain why love beyond marriage became not only a topos, but also a subtle form of self-expression.[137] At the same time, the court's relatively tolerant attitude toward desire and

[131] Xiaofei Tu and Wendy Xie, "The Kojiki/Nihon Shoki Mythology and Chinese Mythology: Theme, Structure, and Meaning," *Religions* 12 (2021): 1–20.
[132] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[133] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[134] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[135] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[136] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[137] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.

sensuality influenced how these themes were treated, allowing them to be explored through many nuances rather than moral judgment.[138]

Amid these changes, people of the Heian period came to see the stages of life, birth, aging, sickness, and death, as closely connected to the Buddha's teachings. Many turned to Buddhism, seeking relief from suffering and hoping for rebirth in a peaceful afterlife.[139] By the eleventh century, major Buddhist schools such as Tendai, Shingon, and Amidism shared a common view of human existence marked by frustration and impermanence. The world was seen as transient and insubstantial, a place where desire inevitably led to dissatisfaction and sorrow. This awareness of impermanence (無常, *mujō*) came to define the spiritual outlook of the time, reinforcing the importance of Buddhism in both people's personal belief and everyday life.[140]

Both Shinto and Buddhism acknowledged human emotions and feelings as part of the natural world, reflecting the rhythms and impulses of life. Shinto perceived emotions as an open expression of harmony within nature, while Buddhism situated feelings within the realm of desire, the source of human suffering, and interpretated them through the framework of the Four Noble Truths (四諦, *shitai*).[141] In Japan, widespread Mahayana Buddhism placed compassion at the center of its teachings.[142] In this context, romantic and sexual love were understood as forms of desire, and therefore seen as potential sources of human suffering. At the same time, such feelings were not judged as morally good or bad, instead they were accepted as natural impulses that are part of the human nature. For this reason, while Buddhist teachings on compassion aimed at the alleviation of suffering and the cultivation of detachment, the concept of love remained tied to attachment and longing and thus belonged to a different moral and spiritual sphere.[143]

The second of the Four Noble Truths identifies *taṇhā* or desire (集諦, *jittai*) as the root of suffering. This "desire" includes not only greed and craving but also emotional longing and

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[138] Xinran Xie, "The Impact of the Research on *The Tale of Genji* on Contemporary Society: Interpretation of the Two Dimensions of *The Tale of Genji*," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 586 (2021): 968–970.
[139] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[140] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[141] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[142] Shoyu Hanayama, "Christian 'Love' and Buddhist 'Compassion'," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū (Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies)* 20 (1971): 464–455.
[143] Shoyu Hanayama, "Christian 'Love' and Buddhist 'Compassion'," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū (Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies)* 20 (1971): 464–455.

attachment. In this view, both love and hate grow from the same impulse to cling to or control what one desires, this attachment keeping individuals bound to the cycle of rebirth. Ending suffering therefore requires the gradual release of such desire.[144] From this standpoint, love was seen as a form of attachment that tied human beings to an impermanent world, something that must be acknowledged and understood, but ultimately transcended in the search for spiritual liberation.[145] However Buddhism did not reject love entirely, it placed affection within the wider understanding of human experience: even when love led people astray, it was seen as a natural part of human life. In this way, the Buddhist view of love in Japan accepted desire as a human impulse while reminding people of its fleeting and binding nature.[146] The Buddhist lay follower was therefore encouraged to cultivate detachment even toward close family members, directing feelings of compassion equally toward all living beings following the reasoning that, through countless cycles of rebirth, every creature may have once been one's child, parent, or loved one. Such strict moral discipline produced distinctive adaptations as Buddhism spread within the country, reinforcing ethical foundations built upon interpersonal relationships.[147]

The "official" Buddhist teachings treat most forms of love as obstacles on the path to enlightenment. However, certain positive emotions resembling love are recognized and encouraged, especially those that transcend attachment. Chief among these is *maitrī* or kindness (慈, *ji*) which represents a universal goodwill toward all beings. This virtue embodies the middle path, avoiding both excessive attachment and hostility, and stands as one of Buddhism's central moral ideals in its teaching on emotional balance.[148]

In this context the term *ai* (愛, implying "love as care") carries a distinctly Buddhist nuance. Originating in Buddhist terminology, *ai* conveys a sense of devotion and care rather than romantic passion. It appears frequently in sutras and *setsuwa* tales, where it describes compassionate feelings such as a parent's love for a child or a ruler's benevolence toward his people. This understanding of love as *ai* emphasizes protection and selfless concern, reflecting Buddhism's ideal of care without attachment. Notably, in the literature of the Heian period, *ai* is rarely used to describe romantic

[144] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[145] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[146] Ferenc Takó, "Forms of Love and the Family in Watsuji Tetsurō's Thought," (2026): 49–71.
[147] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[148] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.

relationships between men and women, underscoring the difference between care and romantic affection.[149]

Having confirmed that Buddhist teachings on detachment and compassion define sexual longing and passionate love as deep forms of attachment that lead to suffering,[150] it is important to note that, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan, it encountered a spiritual landscape already shaped by Shinto's more hopeful worldview. Shinto perceived existence as a harmonious balance and accepted natural impulses, including sexuality, as part of that order. This unique outlook influenced how Buddhist ideas were received and understood. As a result, this interaction softened the more ascetic aspects of Buddhism, leading to a distinctly Japanese interpretation that approached desire with greater flexibility.[151]

It is no wonder, then, that in countries without a comparable indigenous influence, such as Thailand, Buddhist thought maintained a more traditional view of love and attachment. Studies show that in Thailand, where Buddhism developed without the moderating presence of a belief system like Shinto, people nowadays most often associate love not only with care and connection but also with suffering. This illustrates how Japan's integration of Shinto and Buddhist ideas produced a more balanced understanding of love.[152]

Buddhism teaching that desire ultimately leads to suffering existed alongside the Shinto sense that sexual intercourse and proper behavior could attract the favor of *kami*. Between the populace, feelings of guilt or unease arose from an inner awareness shaped by Buddhist ethics clashing with the Shinto belief that seemed to perceive those acts as completely natural,[153] however over time these two perspectives came to coexist within the moral climate of the Heian period.[154]

Unlike in Europe, where Christian ideas about sin often encouraged suspicion toward women and the human body, the Heian understanding of love accepted sensuality as part of the human experience. Sexual desire was interpreted through a Buddhist lens that saw all longing as bound to

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[149] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[150] Margaret H. Childs, "Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?" *Monumenta Nipponica* (1980): 127–151.
[151] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[152] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[153] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[154] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

frustration and suffering, yet, thanks to Shinto presence, this view did not entirely deny the emotional or spiritual value of erotic experience.[155] Lovers could offer each other's compassion and comfort in a world ruled by impermanence, reflecting the merciful presence of figures such as Amida Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Even brief encounters could carry spiritual achievement: in these portrayals, desire was depicted not simply as an appetite but as an expression of human vulnerability and symbolized the search for connection.[156]

Within the official religion of the imperial government, Buddhist practice and *kami* worship blended while still maintaining their distinct identities. Among the Heian aristocracy, these ideas were expressed through refined social and artistic practices. Desire, whether romantic or aspirational, was now understood as both natural and potentially binding. At the same time, beliefs surrounding the latter days of Buddhism strongly shaped individual faith and people's daily life,[157] and the sense that the world was entering an age of decline (末法, *mappō*) gradually influenced how people understood morality and emotions.[158]

Love and Longing in the Heian Court

To understand the gestures, values, interpretations, and practices of love in the Heian period, it is necessary to rely on the literature of the time. In fact, contemporary texts provide the clearest insight into how romantic love was experienced, expressed, and understood during this era.

In the refined and introspective environment of the Heian court, for the very first time a tradition of courtly love slowly began to take shape. This form of love developed within the aristocratic society, influenced by the elegant world of the capital, and only gradually extended its impact beyond it. The culture of the Heian elite defined the values, the emotions, and most importantly the aesthetic sensibilities that characterized its literature.[159] In their understanding of love and desire, these aristocrats did not separate the physical from the spiritual, or the body from the soul, as European

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[155] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[156] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[157] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[158] Ken'ichi Maekawa (前川健一), "Bukkyō wa Nihon de Nani ni Deatta no Ka — Bukkyō Denrai no Saikentō" (*仏教は日本で何に出会ったのか――仏教伝来の再検討*), *Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai Nenpō* (*日本佛教学会年報*) (2021): 1–16.
[159] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.

Christians would do.[160] Yet this sophisticated cultural world belonged to an extraordinarily small segment of the population. Out of roughly five million people living in early Japan, only about one percent lived in the capital, and only a tiny fraction of those, perhaps a tenth of one percent, belonged to the highest ranks of the aristocracy. Nearly all surviving primary accounts of the Heian period come from this highly privileged group. Consequently, our understanding of romantic love mostly reflects the experiences of the elite rather than those of provincial officials or the wider population, about whom very little is known.[161]

The rise of courtly love marked a clear shift in literary sensibility: in monogatari and diaries, love became the dominant theme. Unlike earlier chronicles like the *Kojiki*, Heian literature turned inward, the same way society did, focusing on the emotional and psychological world of its characters. The portrayal of love moved away from straightforward physical and erotic desires and faced towards the inner world of feelings and emotions. Romantic plots were shaped by the ideals of courtly elegance, favoring sensitivity over direct expression, and revealing a growing attention to human feelings: love, in this context, was also an affirmation of personal emotion against the constraints of social expectation.[162] In these works, passion was conveyed through lyric poetry, transforming desire into a refined and subtle emotional language.[163] Yet in everyday life, verse was equally indispensable, playing a central role both in courtship and in mature relationships.[164] This is evident in the following episode, in which Lady Yūgao recites a poem to express her shy surprise when Genji, the man with whom she has spent several nights with, despite refusing to expose his identity, reveals his face to her for the first time.

> Seeing an evening face
> In the dewy radiance shining
> From trees and grasses
> Now at twilight it is clear
> Someone has been mistaken[165]

[160] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[161] Melinda Varner, "Teaching about Heian Japan," *Education About Asia* 10 (2005): 15–24.
[162] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[163] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[164] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[165] Hatsue Kawamura, *A String of Flowers, Untied: Love Poems from The Tale of Genji*, trans. Jane Reichhold (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).

The first Japanese authors quickly recognized that love was more than just a feeling, it was a central element of social and private life that could be turned into a tool to portray both the elegance and the fragility of courtly life.[166] Unlike in Europe, with its *troubadours*, the Heian court had no professional poets; aristocrats themselves were both the creators and the audience of this new literature. The culture of love that emerged was closely shaped by their refined tastes which embraced human emotions in all its nuances.[167]

In the poetry and prose of the Heian and medieval periods, love often appeared in its most poignant form: longing and loss. Tales of frustrated love, separation, and death became recurring themes, mirroring the Buddhist understanding of impermanence that permeated that age.[168] By looking at such portrayals, the observer can immediately understand that love was not only a source of artistic inspiration but also a tool the Heian elite employed to explore the fleeting nature of beauty, desire, and human emotions. The ability to recognize and share another's emotional suffering was seen as a sign of refinement and sensitivity for both men and women. In fiction, poetry, and autobiographies of the period, references to tear-soaked sleeves were frequent: shedding tears showed a deep emotional capacity, suggested spiritual depth, and gently invited others to show the same empathy.[169] An poignant example is the poem Genji quietly utters at Lady Yūgao's funeral.

> Seeing a loved one
> In the crematory smoke
> Rising as a cloud
> The evening skies then look
> Surprisingly familiar[170]

Together with this sensibility, the practice of *irogonomi* (色好み, implying "love as sensitivity and insatiable desire") helped shape courtly approaches to love: Heian elite cultivated emotional sensitivity and aesthetic refinement by interacting with the opposite sex, sometimes using poetry, to understand subtle feelings and social dynamics. In this way, *irogonomi* is closely tied to empathy and

[166] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[167] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[168] Margaret H. Childs, "Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?" *Monumenta Nipponica* (1980): 127–151.
[169] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).
[170] Hatsue Kawamura, *A String of Flowers, Untied: Love Poems from The Tale of Genji*, trans. Jane Reichhold (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).

to the appreciation of love, and in many tales, it also offered as a path toward Buddhist awakening, reflections on attachment and desire becoming a form of moral and spiritual cultivation.[171]

This sensibility finds one of its most profound expressions in the *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語, "The Tale of Genji"), a cornerstone of Japanese literature. Written by Murasaki Shikibu (978-1015? AD), poet, novelist, and lady-in-waiting at the Imperial court during the Heian period, it offers a powerful depiction of a courtly life deeply permeated by Buddhist thought.[172] Although the precise date of its composition remains uncertain, it is generally believed it was written between 1001 and 1008 AD. Recognized as the earliest realistic novel in world literature, it stands at the height of Japanese classical literary achievements.[173] From this moment onwards, women played a crucial role in shaping the Japanese literary world as authors and storytellers: through their poetry, stories, and memoirs, they depicted the realities of courtly life and the emotions of those living in it.[174]

At the center of Murasaki Shikibu's masterpiece stands Genji, a prince admired for his beauty and charm, whose relationships include many court ladies and geisha.[175] He embodies the ideals of courtly refinement: perceptive, well-intentioned, and deeply responsive to beauty, especially of the women he falls in love with.[176] Yet beneath his elegance lies a constant awareness of life's transience.[177] Throughout the novel, Genji is well aware of the fragility of worldly beauty and the suffering that romantic attachment can bring, an understanding typical of Buddhist idea of impermanence. This emotional sensitivity is captured by the concept of *aware*, a key term in Heian literature expressing the gentle sorrow associated with love, loss, and the passing of time. Through Genji's experiences, Murasaki reveals the vulnerability beneath the elegant Heian court and the quiet sadness that often accompanies desire. Genji's relationships, though sincere, rarely lead to long-lasting happiness: the women around him live within narrow constraints, some achieving limited

[171] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[172] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[173] Xinran Xie, "The Impact of the Research on *The Tale of Genji* on Contemporary Society: Interpretation of the Two Dimensions of *The Tale of Genji*," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 586 (2021): 968–970.
[174] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[175] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.
[176] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[177] Sekiko Satō (佐藤勢紀子), "Genji Monogatari no Butsukan: Hōben no Omoi ni Sokushite" (源氏物語の仏観―方便の思いに即して), Nihon Bungaku Kyōkai-shi (日本文学協会誌) 51 (1991): 1–15.

security through painful compromises, while others are only met with misfortune.[178] The poem Lady Rokujō sends to Genji after Lady Aoi's death highlights this, as her passing comes in the wake of Genji's neglect and the weight of Rokujō's jealous spirit.

> It's sad to learn
> One's destiny in this world
> Is dewlike and yet
> I worry about the fleeting life
> Of the one who is left behind[179]

The novel's narrative suggests that romantic love could act as a path to self-discovery, a way to grasp the depths of feelings and the fragility of human connections, something that cannot be fully understood through Buddhist doctrine or reflection alone.[180] Within this view, love is both beautiful and painful, its very intensity revealing the impermanence of all human bonds. Murasaki Shikibu thus presents love not as a moral lesson, but as a mirror of the human condition, where the pursuit of affection inevitably carries the shadow of loss.[181]

Romantic love in the *Genji Monogatari* is portrayed as complex and multifaceted, bringing both tenderness and turmoil. It may stir jealousy and longing, yet it is never idealized through the lens of monogamy or exclusivity. For aristocratic men, having multiple relationships was socially acceptable, reflecting prestige, while on the other hand, women had far less freedom. Diaries and poetry often describe the anguish women felt over their lovers' affairs, showing once again how love was often fleeting and fell outside the bounds of formal marriage.[182] This tension between desire and constraint appeared first in the *Kojiki*: the motif of the woman patiently waiting for her beloved, enduring longing and separation, shows how patterns of devotion and unfulfilled attachment persisted across Japanese literary and social history from Asuka period long into Heian courtly love literary landscape.

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[178] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[179] Hatsue Kawamura, *A String of Flowers, Untied: Love Poems from The Tale of Genji*, trans. Jane Reichhold (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).
[180] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[181] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[182] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.

Genji Monogatari and Changing Terms of Love

Before turning to an analysis of specific, culturally relevant aspects of the *Genji Monogatari*, such as the depicted romantic practices, the concept of sin, and the semantics of love language, it is necessary to clarify whether, and how, the text is influenced by both Shinto and Buddhist thought. Showing how these two belief systems coexist within the text helps us understand whether the romantic and relational models in the novel reflect a fusion of different religious worldviews.

Although the *Genji Monogatari* is deeply permeated by Buddhist thought, it retains clear traces of earlier Shinto sensibility. The novel's detailed descriptions of nature, the changing seasons, the blowing wind, and the ebb and flow of blooming flowers, convey an aesthetic awareness rooted in a distinctly Shinto perspective, as the following excerpt demonstrates.[183]

> Brushing off
> Sleeves wet with dew
> From wild carnations
> Gale storms add to the ruin
> That also comes in autumn[184]

At the same time, in these images hides an evident Buddhist awareness: concepts such as impermanence and karmic destiny (宿世, *shukuse*) shape the moral and emotional foundation of the narrative and influence how each character interprets their own life experiences.[185] In this way, *Genji Monogatari* reflects the religious and cultural environment of the Heian court, where Buddhism and Shinto sensibilities coexisted and interacted. Buddhist ideas influence how characters understand love and loss, while Shinto beliefs toward the body and nature continuously support an indulging view of intimacy, expressed through poetic exchanges. Together, these elements show how Buddhist ideas on impermanence and suffering could coexist with a Shinto-derived acceptance of sensuality in Heian court life.[186]

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[183] Xinran Xie, "The Impact of the Research on *The Tale of Genji* on Contemporary Society: Interpretation of the Two Dimensions of *The Tale of Genji*," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 586 (2021): 968–970.

[184] Hatsue Kawamura, A String of Flowers, Untied: Love Poems from The Tale of Genji, trans. Jane Reichhold (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).

[185] Sekiko Satō (佐藤勢紀子), "Genji Monogatari no Butsukan: Hōben no Omoi ni Sokushite" (源氏物語の仏観―方便の思いに即して), Nihon Bungaku Kyōkai-shi (日本文学協会誌) 51 (1991): 1–15.

[186] Sekiko Satō (佐藤勢紀子), "Genji Monogatari no Butsukan: Hōben no Omoi ni Sokushite" (源氏物語の仏観―方便の思いに即して), Nihon Bungaku Kyōkai-shi (日本文学協会誌) 51 (1991): 1–15.

The Buddhist nature of *Genji Monogatari* becomes evident through several topos that shape the narrative's sense of morality. One of the most significant ones is the idea of sin (罪, *tsumi*), a term that appears nearly two hundred times throughout the work, often within a Buddhist context. In the novel, love itself is not treated as inherently wrong, but it becomes a burden the moment it prevents detachment and moral discipline. This understanding of sin reveals how deeply the whole narrative is rooted in Buddhist ethics.[187] A second aspect of Buddhist influence in *Genji Monogatari* is evident in how women are depicted and in the moral expectations placed upon them. The narrative reflects Buddhist ideas associating femininity to impurity, deeming them unfit to reach liberation, rooted in doctrines that associated women with moral weakness[188] and saw their attainment of Buddhahood as only possible in the eventuality of their rebirth as men.[189] Japanese Buddhism reinforced these ideas with the doctrine of *Goshō Sanjū* (五障三従, lit. "five obstructions and three obligations"), which stated that women could not be reborn as bodhisattva and were expected to obey their father, husband, and son. Despite being partly influenced by Confucian ideas of social hierarchy, these teachings were absorbed into Buddhist discourse, strengthening the association between femininity and impurity.[190]

These beliefs deeply shape the experiences of female characters in the novel: the "ideal woman" is beautiful, gentle, and obedient, one who endures with patience, forgiving male misbehaviors, and embodying maternal compassion. Such traits became increasingly central in later Japanese literature, especially as Confucian thought became more influential, a development that will be explored in the following chapter. Yet beneath these virtues lies a distinctly Buddhist tension: the same qualities that make women admirable, bind them to attachment and suffering.[191] In this way, the *Genji Monogatari* shows how Buddhist ideas of impurity and spiritual limitation deeply influenced both the representation and the fate of women of the Heian world.[192]

As we have seen, Buddhist and Shinto sensibilities coexist seamlessly in the *Genji Monogatari*, shaping both courtly life and the Heian court understanding of love. This fusion is also reflected in

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[187] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.
[188] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[189] Haruko Wakita and David P. Phillips, "Women and the Creation of the 'Ie' in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* (1993): 85–105.
[190] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[191] Xinran Xie, "The Impact of the Research on *The Tale of Genji* on Contemporary Society: Interpretation of the Two Dimensions of *The Tale of Genji*," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 586 (2021): 968–970.
[192] Hyosook Kim, "Religion and the Sense of Ethics in Ancient Japan: Analysis of the Buddhist Worldview Based on *The Tale of Genji*," *Journal of Dharma* 49 (2024): 127–140.

the terms used to describe romantic attraction and desire. Unlike many Western traditions, which sharply separate lust and love, Heian Japanese used a single, flexible vocabulary to express both emotional and sexual attachment.

A central term in this lexicon is *suki* (好き, implying "infatuation"), the conventional word used to show attraction toward another person, still in use nowadays. *Suki* included both physical desire and romantic affection, as well as longing for one's beloved.[193] Love, in this sense, was understood first and foremost as desire, with differences of intensity or commitment being conveyed through context rather than distinct semantics. In the *Genji Monogatari*, *suki* and its derivatives describe a wide range of experiences, from fleeting encounters to deep infatuations. For example, *sukiwaza* (好き業, lit. "suki-acts") and *sukigoto* (好き事, lit. "suki-events") describe love affairs or casual liaisons, while *sukigokoro* (好き心, lit. "suki-mind") and *sukigokochi* (好き心地, lit. "suki-feeling") convey the romantic inclinations. Interestingly, these terms carry only mild negative connotations, once again implying that desire was understood as a natural and socially recognized aspect of everyday life.[194]

Alongside *suki*, the Heian concept of *mono-omoi* (物思い, implying "deep and mutual sexual relationship") expressed a more introspective form of longing: a yearning for relationships that were reciprocal, free from coercion, and most importantly built on mutual empathy. Even in these cases, desire was not separate from reciprocal care. In Heian society it was neither possible nor necessary to separate sensual attraction from devotion, nor lust from genuine affection: a beauty that inspired desire could also inspire devotion, empathy, or true love.[195] This linguistic unity reflects the spiritual landscape of the period, where Buddhist awareness of impermanence and Shinto affirmation of natural impulse coexisted.

Where True Love Lies

Love in the Heian period was perceived as a shifting, uncertain feeling. Beneath all the tales revolving around the courtly life, the *Genji Monogatari* reflects on the nature of romantic love,

[193] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[194] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[195] Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Springer, 2017).

exploring whether it can become a path toward empathy and self-knowledge. There is no explicit teaching about what is right or what is wrong, what is good or what is true, yet the recurring sense of failure that haunts many characters suggests that love, if pursued without sincerity, ultimately brings only to sorrow.[196]

Murasaki Shikibu's work is much more than a simple portrayal of the Heian court life or women's life experiences. It reveals the author careful observation of how affection was expressed in her society: all the gestures, the hesitations, and the social conventions that shaped how love was perceived at the time. Many of the romantic customs she describes in her masterpiece are not fictional, they are documented behaviors of Heian aristocratic life. A clear example is the practice of *nakakushi* (名隠, lit. "hiding names"), describing how lovers sometimes concealed their real identities one another during the early stages of a relationship. The author presents this as a romantic custom: in the novel, Genji and Yūgao never reveal their real names, and Oborozukiyo also avoids disclosing hers during her affair with the Shining Prince as we can see in the following extract.[197]

> Useless worldly self
> Which will vanish soon enough
> If you look for it
> Within the fields of grass
> Would you think to ask for me?[198]

By including such details, Murasaki Shikibu discloses to her audience some aspects of Heian romantic courtly etiquette; this suggests that she was not only writing a fictional story but also observing and recording social practices of her time. Through her narrative, she offers insights into how relationships were initiated, articulated, and understood in the refined world of the Heian court.

It seems that, for Murasaki, the highest form of romantic love can only develop when two people can openly share their feelings and perceive each other's hearts without concealment. This ideal is openly stated in the story of the Third Princess Murasaki: her nurse insists she should marry a man she can communicate earnestly with, a partner who can truly understand her heart. In the end,

[196] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[197] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[198] Hatsue Kawamura, A String of Flowers, Untied: Love Poems from The Tale of Genji, trans. Jane Reichhold (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).

Genji is chosen for his status and for his emotional sensitivity that seems to promise this kind of mutual understanding.[199]

This new form of romantic love, which appears in the *Genji Monogatari* for the first time in the Japanese literary landscape, is expressed through the previously mentioned concept of *magokoro*, the "true heart." Rooted in Shinto belief[200] and further influenced by Buddhist lens, *magokoro* is a key concept in *Genji Monogatari*, fundamental to understand the whole narrative, that defines a new, more modern understanding of romantic love grounded in sincerity and compassion.[201] In this context, *magokoro* is not just a synonym for moral virtue, as it will be in later Neo-Confucian thought, but rather a form of trust that can exist only between two genuinely sincere people. It is not a quality to be displayed before all, instead, it must only be revealed to one's beloved.[202] Through these portrayals, Murasaki Shikibu defines her own interpretation of romantic love, offering her own answer to the tensions between Buddhist restraint and human desire: love can offer a new kind of salvation not through renunciation, but through mutual sincerity and compassion.[203]

This chapter has shown how Buddhist thought influenced Japanese views of romantic relationships by defining desire, and by extension love, as a source of attachment and as a possible cause of suffering, encouraging a detached attitude toward romance. At the same time, the Japanese context managed to create new strategies to balance romantic attachment with the ever-present Buddhist awareness. That is observed in *Genji Monogatari* and in how deeply it reflects on the nature of romantic love by showing how awareness of life's impermanence can transform love into understanding and compassion for another person. Through the concept of *magokoro*, the novel introduces a new model of romantic love based on sincerity and openness, offering for the first time a softer and more psychological ideal of romantic love.[204] The lesson here seems to be that by opening one's heart to another, a person can discover their natural goodness and move toward emotional and moral maturity.[205]

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[199] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[200] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[201] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[202] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[203] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[204] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[205] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.

Neo-Confucianism and Human Attitudes

Love, which swiftly seizes the noble heart. – Dante

In tracing how Japanese culture has imagined and depicted romantic love, one cannot help but return to the lingering questions whispered through the *Genji Monogatari*: what does it truly mean to love another person? Is love nothing more than a sudden stirring of the heart, an impulse, a longing, a desire that flares and fades? Or can it become something deeper, a path two people can walk together to truly understand themselves? Murasaki Shikibu hinted that the deepest form of romantic love, the *magokoro*, allows two people to discover their own hidden goodness. This idea, centuries before Neo-Confucianism codified the doctrine of innate human virtue, already suggested that love could become a tool for moral cultivation.[206] This connection between emotions and ethical development naturally leads to Confucianism. If Buddhism taught detachment and Shinto affirmed life's natural impulses, Confucianism focused on the moral structure of society: how families should be, how man-woman dynamics are to be enacted, and how individual emotions could or could not support social harmony.

For a long time, however, the very nature of Confucianism was debated: was it a religion, or just a life doctrine? In the sixteenth century, Christian missionaries often regarded Confucianism not as a faith but as a sophisticated ethical and philosophical tradition.[207] Over the following centuries, its status continued to be debated again and again and, by the late nineteenth century, scholars such as Max Müller positioned it within the emerging "world religions" framework.[208] Its core texts were treated as "classics" rather than scriptures, reflecting Confucius's original intent to revive the moral teachings of the sage-kings rather than to establish a new religion.[209] This ambiguity explains why Confucianism is included in this study alongside the major religions that influenced Japanese history. While not always a religion in the conventional sense, it profoundly influenced ethical norms, family structures, and gender dynamics.

Confucian thought provided the male-female relationships structure, situating women within ideals such as the *ryōsai kenbo*, and reinforcing patterns already present in Buddhism. It profoundly

[206] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[207] John Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998): 46–79.
[208] Kiri Paramore, "'Civil Religion' and Confucianism: Japan's Past, China's Present, and the Current Boom in Scholarship on Confucianism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* (2015): 269–282.
[209] John Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998): 46–79.

influenced, and still influences, social life. It is also important to note that with the growing influence of Confucian morality, romantic love literature fell into decline, restricting free depictions of romanticism.[210] For this reason, in this chapter the focus will remain on doctrines and gender dynamics rather than literary representations, using philosophy and religious thought as the primary lens for understanding whether definitions of romantic love shifted in Edo Japan.

A Short History of Confucianism

Confucianism is one of the most enduring ethical philosophies surviving in East Asia, shaping social life for more than two thousand years now.[211] Established by Confucius (551-479 BC), it eventually became a core doctrine in China's agricultural feudal society, permeating politics, social psychology, customs, and everyday ways of thinking and living.[212] It was both a formal political ideology and a moral ethic that people followed, and still follow, almost unconsciously. Because of its dual nature, Confucianism deeply permeates family life, education, government approach, and interpersonal relationships, influencing the social fabric of East Asia in ways that became deeply taken for granted.[213]

As China prospered, its cultural influence expanded, and Confucian teachings spread throughout East Asia and South-East Asia: from the Korean peninsula to the Japanese archipelago, from Vietnam to smaller regions with significant Chinese communities, such as Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Singapore.[214] Through this long process of transmission and reinterpretation, Confucianism became a shared ethical foundation across the whole region.[215]

Japan's earliest contact with Confucian thought dates approximately to the fifth and sixth centuries, when Chinese knowledge reached the archipelago through the Korean peninsula. Alongside

[210] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[211] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.
[212] Ersheng Gao, Xiayun Zuo, Li Wang, Chaohua Lou, Yan Cheng, and Laurie S. Zabin, "How Does Traditional Confucian Culture Influence Adolescents' Sexual Behavior in Three Asian Cities?" *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2014): 1–14.
[213] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[214] Ersheng Gao, Xiayun Zuo, Li Wang, Chaohua Lou, Yan Cheng, and Laurie S. Zabin, "How Does Traditional Confucian Culture Influence Adolescents' Sexual Behavior in Three Asian Cities?" *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2014): 1–14.
[215] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.

Buddhism, Confucian teachings entered Japan as part of a broader wave of cultural borrowing, and the two imported belief systems initially developed in tandem.

Prince Shōtoku and other rulers of the time became acquainted with both disciplines, promoting them as valuable sources of political and ethical guidance. Shōtoku's *Seventeen-Article Constitution* of 604 AD exemplifies this early appropriation of Confucianism: the document blends Confucian and Buddhist teachings and it is marked by an irenic and tolerant tone. "Harmony is to be valued and contentiousness avoided. All men are inclined to partisanship and few are truly discerning" is the opening injunction, and it illustrates how Confucian principles of encouraging harmony and ethical government were adapted to Japanese necessities rather than passively adopted.[216]

The subsequent Taika Reforms continued this process by establishing a centralized state inspired by Chinese governance.[217] As part of this system, the Japanese government adopted a set of penal and civil codes grounded in Confucian ethics, with filial piety at their core, which remained in place for over a millennium, until the Meiji Constitution of 1889, demonstrating the enduring influence of Confucian thought on Japanese society.[218] These codes outlined both family life and governance style, making Confucian obligations a cornerstone of social and legal order.[219]

Confucianism entered a cultural environment where Shinto and Buddhism coexisted and interacted,[220] and initially it competed with the far more established and institutionally powerful Buddhism for imperial attention. For centuries Confucian teachings remained in the background, operating quietly as a moral and political reference rather than a dominant ideology.[221]

Centuries later, when Neo-Confucianism began to circulate in Japan, it initially spread through Buddhist channels, introduced and studied by monks who carried Chinese texts. Over time, however, several factors helped it break away from this dependence and gain its own influence.[222] The constant turmoil of the Warring States period weakened Buddhist authority: temples became entangled in warfare and political alliances, losing their credibility as religious leaders. As Japan took more steps towards peace and unification, ruling elites and scholars searched for a new system that could support

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[216] Melinda Varner, "Teaching about Heian Japan," *Education About Asia* 10 (2005): 15–24.
[217] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[218] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[219] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[220] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[221] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[222] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).

social order, impose hierarchy, and regulate governance; Neo-Confucianism, with its strong emphasis on moral cultivation, civic responsibility, and social harmony, became an appealing alternative.[223]

As Neo-Confucianism spread, criticism of the long-standing Shinto-Buddhist synthesis intensified, while Shinto began to develop its own independent identity.[224] In the Edo period, this anti-Buddhist Confucian thought fused with Shinto and, challenging Buddhist authority, emperors and rulers used Confucian values to reshape society and promote a new order.[225] Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and his successors appointed Confucian scholars as personal advisers and used their teachings to reinforce the authority of the *bakufu*.[226] Under the Tokugawa shogunate, almost a millennium after Confucianism first reached Japan, Neo-Confucianism was intentionally manipulated to lay the foundations of a new government that supported more than two centuries of peace.[227]

Neo-Confucianism's rise happened at the same time as some major social and economic changes such as the agricultural expansion, growing businesses, increased literacy, and the spreading of commercial publishing. These developments broadened access to education and created a new, bigger literate audience that was not limited to temple residents anymore, allowing Neo-Confucian ideas to spread among warriors, officials, and urban communities.[228]

In this context, Edo period's new hierarchical structure played a fundamental role: Japan was a feudal society where samurai class established the roots of political authority. Because samurai, despite their status, did not own any land, loyalty to one's lord slowly became a crucial matter. As they adopted and adapted Confucian teachings, the warrior class developed a distinctly Japanese interpretation of Confucian values, one that placed extraordinary weight on loyalty and service.[229]

As Neo-Confucianism gradually detached from Buddhism and aligned with government needs, it acquired a clearer identity and became a fundamental tool shaping moral order and political stability.[230] Japanese thinkers actively engaged with the teachings of Neo-Confucian philosophers Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529),[231] their emphasis on moral cultivation resonated deeply with the ethos of the warrior class and eventually became woven into *bushido*, the

[223] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[224] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[225] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[226] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[227] Melinda Varner, "Teaching about Heian Japan," *Education About Asia* 10 (2005): 15–24.
[228] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[229] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[230] Liqi Feng, "Kaibara Ekiken's Syncretic Shinto–Confucian Philosophy," *Religions* 16 (2025).
[231] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.

"Way of the Warrior."[232] Yet even in this period of Confucian ascendancy, Neo-Confucian ideas kept blending with Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, becoming something uniquely Japanese rather than a simple extension of its Chinese origins.[233]

Confucianism in China, Neo-Confucianism in Japan

Confucianism can be defined as an ethical philosophy that focuses on everyday human behavior rather than abstract theory. Its principles revolve around the ways people should live, how they should treat others, and how they should develop and improve their behavior over time. The main Confucian texts, *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, introduce a view of human life centered on personal virtue and self-cultivation. According to these texts, the process of becoming a good human begins within the family.[234]

Filial piety, which can be described as respect and care for one's parents, is the core teaching of this philosophy. It declares that people begin to understand what it truly means to live ethically only the moment they learn how to show true consideration, sense of responsibility, and genuine affection and sincerity towards their parents. In Confucian thought, family becomes the foundational unit where ethical values are learned, practiced, and internalized.[235] Because of this emphasis, Confucianism shaped how individuals believed they should feel towards family members, encouraging sincerity, care, and respect, as well as how they should behave when interacting with them.[236]

In Confucian thought, a person is not considered a completely independent individual who exists on their own. Instead, each person is understood as part of their family, and the family is made up of members who depend on one another and share responsibilities, bonds, and expectations.[237] Although other traditions, such as Buddhism and Daoism, played an important role in shaping religious beliefs, Confucianism dictated how people were expected to behave within their families

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[232] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[233] Melinda Varner, "Teaching about Heian Japan," *Education About Asia* 10 (2005): 15–24.
[234] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.
[235] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[236] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[237] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.

and within the communities they belonged to.[238] For this reason, many scholars argue that contemporary East Asian societies' values, such as prioritizing the group over the individual, showing respect for elders, and valuing hard work, are not just cultural habits but direct inheritances of Confucian teachings.[239]

Although Confucianism originated in China its teachings spread throughout East Asia, and in doing so they did not remain exactly the same.[240] These ideas moved from one region to another and adapted to fit local cultures and social necessities; because of close geographical proximity China, Japan, and Korea approached Confucian thought in a similar way.[241] However, each society interpreted and applied Confucian values in ways that reflected its own priorities and historical experiences.[242] In China, Confucianism placed strong emphasis on the development of empathy or benevolence (仁, *ren*) and on the ability to put oneself in another's position (恕, *shu*). In Korea, Confucius' teachings developed in a somewhat different direction, stressing moral discipline and restraint (节, *jie*). In Japan, however, Confucian ethics absorbed local ideals centered on loyalty (忠, *zhong*) and bravery (勇, *yong*) reflecting a society increasingly influenced by warrior values.[243] As a result, Japanese Confucianism often appeared more "external" and concrete,[244] with visible behavioral patterns, family organization systems, and specific men-women dynamics.[245]

Interestingly, at a certain point in history, Japan and Korea came to preserve Confucian traditions even more rigorously than China itself:[246] scholars sustain it is precisely because Japanese Confucianism did not remain a fixed doctrine, developing as a selective synthesis of Confucian ethics,

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[238] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.
[239] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.
[240] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.
[241] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.
[242] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[243] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[244] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[245] Kiri Paramore, "'Civil Religion' and Confucianism: Japan's Past, China's Present, and the Current Boom in Scholarship on Confucianism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* (2015): 269–282.
[246] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.

Buddhist thought, and Shinto belief, that it eventually surpassed its Chinese counterpart.[247] This dynamic mixture allowed Japanese Confucianism to constantly adapt and repeatedly support national modernization.[248] Gluck argues that without the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation and moral improvement, two deeply embedded values of the Tokugawa period, the later doctrines of self-help and the belief in education as a path to personal advancement would not have taken root so promptly.[249] It is for this reason that Japan has sometimes been described as a "bourgeois Confucian" society.[250] This flexibility contrasts with China, where Confucianism dominated as a moral ideal but was not regularly employed as a political tool.[251]

Japanese Confucianism diverged further once Japan developed its own written language in the ninth century and began to reinterpret Chinese culture. Unlike China, where the emperors' authority derived from the "Mandate of Heaven," Japan's ruler was chosen by birthright, and even when the political power later shifted to the shogunate, sovereignty symbolically stayed with the emperor, reflecting a distinctly Japanese blend of Confucian hierarchy with Japanese traditions.[252]

Differences also emerged in moral ethics: both societies developed a strong "shame consciousness," yet in China this shame was related to moral virtue, while in Japan it concerned social expectations and personal reputation. Japanese placed heavy emphasis on family duties (孝, *kō*), societal duties (忠, *chū*), and on the obligation to maintain an unblemished reputation (義理, *giri*). These values emphasized a deep concern for social harmony and good public image more than in China, where individuals were less constrained by collective expectations.[253]

A final comparison can be observed in the definition of filial piety. In Chinese Confucianism, the family was seen as the foundation of society. Children were supposed to learn respect and responsibility at home and then apply those lessons outside domestic environment.[254] In Japan, however, this idea changed over time: filial piety was reinterpreted so that absolute loyalty became

[247] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.
[248] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[249] Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
[250] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[251] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[252] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[253] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[254] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.

even more important than kindness and other virtues.[255] By spreading this emphasis to the broader society, Tokugawa rulers turned Confucian teachings into a tool for governing large masses of people, fitting their own necessities.[256] Loyalty to one's superior became the center of ethical behavior[257] and this focus on discipline and social cooperation helped prepare Japan for the rapid modernization that occurred in later centuries.[258]

Benevolence and Filial Piety

Now that the main Confucian teachings and its Japanese interpretations and uses have been examined, it is possible to turn to the topic of romantic love or, more precisely, to the lack of thereof: Confucianism in fact does not directly address romantic love, but it emphasizes another key concept that strongly shapes human relationships: benevolence (仁, *ren*).[259] For Confucius, benevolence is expressed through care for others, summed up in teachings such as "loving people" and in the principle "Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself."[260] The character for *ren* itself represents two people, reflecting the idea that virtue exists only in relation to others.

Confucius taught that benevolence begins in the family: love for one's parents forms its foundation and love for siblings naturally follows.[261] From this starting point, code of conduct expands to include the community and, eventually, the state. This reflects a broader Confucian focus on harmony and, especially, on placing the needs of the group above those of the individual.[262] These ideas are clearly expressed in the doctrine of the *Sankō* (三綱, lit. "Three Bonds") that states "the minister serves the ruler, the son serves the father, and the wife serves the husband. If the three are followed, the world will be in peace; if the three are violated, the world will be in chaos." Authority

[255] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1946).
[256] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[257] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[258] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[259] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[260] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[261] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.
[262] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.

flows downward: ruler over minister, father over son, husband over wife, and filial piety ensure that this order is protected.[263]

Filial piety, closely linked to ancestor worship, came to be seen as the highest Confucian virtue and the main model for proper behavior.[264] Practiced, taught, and reinforced for more than two thousand years, it gained such a strong power that people raised within this system often found it, and still find it, difficult to step outside its expectations.[265] Over time, this teachings became more and more rigid, especially under Neo-Confucian thought. From a Western perspective, filial piety is often viewed as a threat to personal autonomy, since all the obligations towards family members clearly limit individuality, independence, and equal rights. In Confucian societies, however, filial piety is not perceived as a restriction but as the foundation of moral order and social harmony.[266]

Because filial piety is always directed toward the father, it naturally reinforces patriarchy. It privileges older generations over younger ones, and men over women, giving women a subordinate role.[267] Even if Confucianism did not produce the same misogynistic religious ideas found in European history, its teachings still gave women very little chances to define themselves outside of domestic roles, their worth always tied to service and obedience.[268]

These Confucian ideas were not just abstract moral teachings, they deeply shaped everyday life in the Edo period. Women came to be divided into two broad categories: respectable women, and courtesans. Consequently, marriage and pleasure started to belong to two separate spheres, each governed by different expectations and social rules. Sexual intimacy slowly came to be seen as mutual desire between two people, expressed outside restrictive environments like the family household more often than not. In this way, sex acquired a complex meaning, becoming one of the few ways someone could express their feelings in a highly controlled society.[269]

As Confucian values became more and more deeply rooted in the Japanese archipelago, the definition of romantic affection began to shift. In the *Genji Monogatari*, true love arises when two people feel

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[263] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[264] Pensri Kanchanomai, "The Japanization of Confucianism," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (1990): 209–217.
[265] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[266] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[267] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[268] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[269] Jennifer Preston, "Allegories of Love," *Japan Review* 26 (2013): 117–135.

safe enough to open their hearts and trust each other. Confucianism, however, did not treat such affection as a virtue: the *magokoro* was not meant to be shared only with one's beloved, but to be shown through proper behavior and loyalty towards all.[270]

After the glories of the Genroku era, scholars noted a decline of romantic literature, reflecting the growing influence of Confucian morality, which discouraged open expressions of personal affection.[271] This lead to a cultural tension developing around the seventeenth century: literature continued to imagine love as a meeting of hearts, while social ethics insisted that emotions should support social order rather than individual desire.[272] China offers a revealing parallel: in the Confucian literary tradition, the narrative rarely focused on romantic love as the main topic, it was usually connected to political tribulations or duty. Instead, poetry often emphasized male friendships and loyalty. In a patriarchal society shaped by Confucian ideas, romantic love was a dangerous subject, often seen as too private and too disruptive, and therefore left out from literary imagination.[273]

Law, Lineage, and the Ryōsai Kenbo Ideal

Once the role of Japanese Confucianism has been established, it becomes possible to see how its principles were applied. Confucian values were increasingly used to define men and women's role, placing them within ever more rigid structures.

During the Tokugawa period, the consolidation of Confucianism encouraged many people to adopt its teachings as a personal creed.[274] Confucian ideas about marriage, hierarchy, and family life began shaping society permanently.[275] Like China and Korea, extended family started to be considered the foundation of social order; in Japan this was formalized in the *ie system*, which emphasized lineage and continuity across generations. Marriage became an alliance between families whose interests stood above personal preference,[276] and daily life followed this logic: men were expected to work

[270] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[271] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[272] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[273] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[274] Kate Wildman Nakai, "The Naturalization of Confucianism in Tokugawa Japan: The Problem of Sinocentrism," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1980): 157–199.
[275] Zixuan Liu, "The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 232 (2018): 77–79.
[276] Dalit Bloch, "A Room of Their Own: Time, Space, and the Self-Perceptions of Married Couples in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 41 (2011): 72–101.

outside, while women oversaw domestic responsibilities and raised children. A clear, gendered, division.[277] Expectations were particularly strict in the samurai class, where women were constantly subordinated to their fathers, husbands, and sons.

In Confucian discourse women were often portrayed as weak or with dangerous tendencies, and this perception was used to justify the necessity of constant supervision.[278] At the same time, Confucian family ethics also stressed mutual obligations: each member had a defined role and the survival of the household depended on everyone's cooperation.[279]

These expectations were reinforced by Buddhist ideas that merged with Confucian values. A notable example was the doctrine of *Goshō Sanjū*, mentioned in the previous chapter. The "five obstructions" taught that women were inherently impure, incapable of achieving Nirvana or any kind of spiritual attainment, while the "three obediences" required a woman to submit first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her eldest son.[280] Over time, these beliefs aligned closely with Confucian ethics and continued to shape what was considered "proper" women's conduct until 1945.[281]

In the *ie system*, loyalty to the family counted more than blood ties: wives and daughters-in-law who married into the household were more important than daughters who married out, and even men who left the family were considered less relevant than newcomers who fully integrated into the household.[282] This hierarchy also applied to legal structures: a wife had to always obey her husband, no matter his behavior, no matter his infidelity, which was tolerated for men, but criminalized for women.[283] From a legal perspective, women were completely dependent on their husbands: they could not sign contracts on their own, and any property registered in their name was controlled by their partner. Only husbands could ask for divorce and women were often left without compensation,

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[277] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[278] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.

[279] Mijung Park and Catherine Ann Chesla, "Revisiting Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Asian Family Study," *Journal of Family Nursing* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–311.

[280] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.

[281] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[282] Chie Nakane, "Ba ni Yoru Shudan no Tokusei (Group Characteristics Based on 'Place')," in *Tateshakai no Ningenkankei (Human Relationships in a Vertical Society)*, ed. Chie Nakane (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1967), 25–43.

[283] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

children also remained part of the husband's household.[284] Marriage itself required the approval of the male head of the family, and daughters had little to say in partner choice.[285]

All these religious, ethical, and legal systems together created an environment where women's lives were only defined by their service to the household rather than by their independent will. The Meiji-era *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母, lit. "good wife, wise mother") discourse, stressing women's obedience and dedication to the household, should be contextualized within this background.[286] With Japan's modernization, the publication of texts and manuals portraying women as gentle, faithful, and thoughtful, always serving their husbands, in-laws, and children, increased.[287] At the same time, social discourses started to describe the household itself as a place that could shape the future of the nation and raising children properly started to be seen as a social duty. As one Meiji-era text stated: "Mothers are the models for children… women are responsible for domestic affairs and economy. Each family can be a school to enlighten [children]. A good mother has power equal to one hundred teachers."[288]

Social expectations worked relationally: women's responsibilities for managing the home and educating children were defined in relation to men's duties in public life and positions of power. Historical texts, such as the *Classic of Rites*, articulated this distinction and figures like Empress Haruko (r. 1869-1914), who exemplified these ideals, provided a model for balancing household and public responsibilities.[289]

With the introduction of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, the emphasis shifted. The 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education no longer stressed strict hierarchy between husband and wife but instead encouraged harmony: "as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true", it stated.

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[284] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[285] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[286] Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Confucian Morals and the Making of a 'Good Wife and Wise Mother': From 'Between Husband and Wife There Is Distinction' to 'As Husbands and Wives Be Harmonious,'" *Social Science Japan Journal* 13 (2010): 95–113.

[287] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[288] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[289] Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Confucian Morals and the Making of a 'Good Wife and Wise Mother': From 'Between Husband and Wife There Is Distinction' to 'As Husbands and Wives Be Harmonious,'" *Social Science Japan Journal* 13 (2010): 95–113.

Confucian ethics continued to influence expectations for behavior, but the focus now was on domestic harmony.[290]

When Japan opened to global trade and entered the Meiji Restoration in the late nineteenth century, many of the country's leaders and intellectuals belonged to the old samurai class who lost political authority but still held strong moral and cultural influence. They no longer had their formal privileges, and in order to build new careers and strengthen the nation they "enthusiastically" acquired Western knowledge.[291]

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the new postwar Constitution dismantled the legal foundations of Confucian patriarchy that had been embedded in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898. For the first time, men and women had equal rights in marriage, divorce, and family life.[292] Women obtained the right to vote in 1947, the requirement of parental consent for marriage was abolished, and women finally gained legal autonomy.[293] Divorce patterns also shifted: women now initiated most divorces and were awarded child custody in the majority of cases.[294] At the same time, new discourses on family began to emerge. Studies of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century ideas of "home" show a growing emphasis on shared feelings, harmony, and affection among family members. Love, now turned into a new moral virtue, slowly started to become an important part of the household.[295] These changes, also influenced by Christian views on marriage, gradually reshaped older Confucian values, contributing to establish love as a legitimate foundation of family life in modern Japan. The decline of the *ryōsai kenbo* ideal,[296] the recognition of women's rights,[297] and the growing importance of

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[290] Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Confucian Morals and the Making of a 'Good Wife and Wise Mother': From 'Between Husband and Wife There Is Distinction' to 'As Husbands and Wives Be Harmonious,'" *Social Science Japan Journal* 13 (2010): 95–113.

[291] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[292] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[293] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[294] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

[295] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[296] Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Confucian Morals and the Making of a 'Good Wife and Wise Mother': From 'Between Husband and Wife There Is Distinction' to 'As Husbands and Wives Be Harmonious,'" *Social Science Japan Journal* 13 (2010): 95–113.

[297] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.

emotional bonds all pointing to a new understanding of marriage and love that will be explored in the following chapter.[298]

[298] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

Christianity Reimagines Romantic Love

Love insists the loved loves back. – Dante

In 1959, Japan was alive with celebration: the streets buzzed with excitement as the greatest wedding of the century captured the nation's imagination: Prince Akihito (r. 1989-2019) was marrying a commoner, defying centuries of tradition. Could this be considered the first outward display of contemporary romantic affection in Japan? This royal union stands in sharp contrast to the restraints explored so far: the *ie system*, women's economical and emotional dependence on men, the lack of equal rights… At a time when the concept of choosing one's partner and marrying for love was still largely unknown, where did this new awareness come from?[299]

The prince's yearning for a happiness to share with a wife and children reflects the ideals and perceptions that motivated him to fight for his future and remain beside his beloved.[300] How, and why, was this even possible? A clue lies in the future princess's upbringing: a Westernized Christian Japanese environment. How did this form of romantic love emerge, something so different from that of Genji, who pursued his passions from one fleeting emotion to the next, living his love stories fully in the moment rather than committing to long-lasting bonds?[301] The answer may lie in the cultural transformations explored in this final chapter.

As Christian ideas entered Japanese discourse, they introduced a new understanding of love grounded in a theology of individuality. Love was no longer tied to natural impulses or to something to be denied in order to achieve greater salvation, but to the recognition of a unique worth in a special person.[302] This model subtly reoriented intimacy between men and women, especially as Japan turned toward the West, by suggesting that personal affection could carry moral and spiritual meaning.[303] Yet this spiritualization of love did not proceed without rising some tensions. While educators and moralists promoted forms such as "respectful love" and "charitable love" as socially stabilizing ideals, romantic love started to be inspected with skeptical eyes. Critics warned that beneath the public

[299] Jan Bardsley, "Fashioning the People's Princess: Women's Magazines, Shōda Michiko, and the Royal Wedding of 1959," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 23 (2002): 57–91.
[300] Jan Bardsley, "Fashioning the People's Princess: Women's Magazines, Shōda Michiko, and the Royal Wedding of 1959," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 23 (2002): 57–91.
[301] Jan Bardsley, "Fashioning the People's Princess: Women's Magazines, Shōda Michiko, and the Royal Wedding of 1959," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 23 (2002): 57–91.
[302] Shirley Robin Letwin, "Romantic Love and Christianity," *Philosophy* 52 (1977): 131–145.
[303] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.

fascination with love lurked sexual or carnal desire, perceived as an unruly force threatening both moral discipline and social order.[304]

A Short History of Christianity

Japan's first encounter with Christianity began in 1549, when the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima, in southern Kyushu.[305] He entered a country fractured by a civil war, marked by political instability and by the absence of a centralized government. The Portuguese had already established limited trades with Japan, and Xavier's arrival marked the beginning of fervent exchanges with the West.[306]

Xavier was struck by the intellectual curiosity and moral seriousness of Japanese people, and after just over two years in the country he was confident that Japan would have been receptive to Christianity. His optimism was not unfounded. In the decades that followed, more and more missionaries arrived, conversions increased, churches were founded and schools established.[307] In a land where people lived under rigid social and religious constraints, Christianity "penetrated the land like water flowing into dry earth," bringing a tenderness previously unknown.[308]

Christianity gained momentum in part because it aligned with the political interests of powerful warlords like Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), who needed European firearms for his military campaigns, as well as regional lords, seeking trade and strategic alliances with the Portuguese.[309] At the same time, Jesuit missionaries promoted Catholic teachings on monogamy and opposed divorce, ideals that often conflicted with local wedding customs. In some cases missionaries compromised, allowing divorce and remarriage among daimyō in order to maintain their patronage.[310] At the time of the Jesuits' arrival, Buddhism was the dominant religious tradition, and missionaries initially focused their efforts on understanding its nuances;[311] by the early seventeenth century, however,

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[304] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[305] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[306] Megumi Watanabe, *Modern Diffusion of Christianity in Japan: How Japanese View Christianity*, Master's thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2004.
[307] Edward Hagemann, "The Persecution of the Christians in Japan in the Middle of the Seventeenth Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 11 (1942): 151–160.
[308] Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (London, England: Picador Classic, 2015).
[309] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[310] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[311] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.

Christianity had expanded to such an extent that estimates suggest it reached nearly ten percent of the population.[312] This period, later called the "Christian Century," left a deep imprint on Japanese society, influencing morality, education, science, and the arts. Its impact was comparable in scope, though not in form, to that of Westernization in the nineteenth century.[313]

The early promise of Catholicism in Japan was soon undermined and ultimately destroyed by great waves of persecution. In 1597, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) ordered the execution of twenty-six Christians in Nagasaki, a violent act that foreshadowed the systematic repression that followed.[314] Under the Tokugawa shogunate, Christianity was formally banned, and from 1639 Japan entered a long period of seclusion that lasted more than two centuries.[315] This *sakoku* policy was not merely religious: Christianity was viewed as inseparable from European political ambitions, particularly those of Portugal and Spain,[316] and opposition to missionaries was rooted in the belief that they had been sent by their kings to win the hearts of the Japanese population as a first step toward the future conquest of the country.[317] The Tokugawa government prohibited overseas travel,[318] dismantled Christian networks, and enforced repression through a highly organized system overseen by a central Inquisition Office.[319] One of its first measures was to block the entry of missionaries, on the assumption that cutting off external support would speed up the disappearance of the faith. Foreigners were therefore forbidden from entering Japan, and any missionaries smuggled in aboard Chinese vessels, along with those who assisted them, were condemned to death. Christian writings and devotional objects were likewise banned.[320] Only the Dutch were permitted to maintain limited commercial relations with Japan.[321]

To identify Christians already living in Japan, the Tokugawa authorities introduced the *fumie* practice. Suspected individuals were forced to step on an image of Christ or the Virgin Mary to prove they were not believers. Refusal was taken as clear evidence of Christian faith and was punished with

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[312] Megumi Watanabe, *Modern Diffusion of Christianity in Japan: How Japanese View Christianity* (Master's thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2004).
[313] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[314] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[315] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[316] Edward Hagemann, "The Persecution of the Christians in Japan in the Middle of the Seventeenth Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 11 (1942): 151–160.
[317] Otis Cary, *A History of Christianity in Japan* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909).
[318] Edward Hagemann, "The Persecution of the Christians in Japan in the Middle of the Seventeenth Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 11 (1942): 151–160.
[319] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[320] Edward Hagemann, "The Persecution of the Christians in Japan in the Middle of the Seventeenth Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 11 (1942): 151–160.
[321] Edward Hagemann, "The Persecution of the Christians in Japan in the Middle of the Seventeenth Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 11 (1942): 151–160.

persecution.[322] Despite these measures, small groups of Christians managed to survive in remote areas such as Urakami, Amakusa, and several villages in the Gotō Islands. Deprived of priests, these communities preserved their faith through clandestine practices, passing prayers and doctrine orally under the guidance of appointed elders. In this way, hidden Christian communities survived for generations, even as Japan increasingly withdrew from the outside world.[323]

In contrast, Buddhism and Confucianism were actively supported by the Tokugawa regime. Buddhism functioned as a monitoring and suppressing tool against Christianity, while Confucianism provided ethical and social rules that reinforced political order and loyalty. Together, these traditions were integrated into the structures of governance, shaping religious life in ways that aligned with state authority.[324] By the mid-seventeenth century, Japan had become a hermit nation.[325]

In 1854, U.S. Commodore Perry's (1794-1858) gunboat diplomacy forced Japan to sign a treaty with the United States, soon followed by similar agreements with other Western powers. Faced with the clear threat of foreign domination, the shogun recognized that the country could no longer remain isolated.[326] Within this new political climate, the ban on Christianity was officially lifted in 1873, not because of a sudden change in religious sentiment, but because the Meiji government was well aware that allowing Christian faith would have helped to present Japan as a "civilized" nation in the eyes of European powers and support the efforts to renegotiate the unequal treaties imposed by the West.[327] Yet the legacy of the Tokugawa period endured. After nearly three centuries of branding Christianity as an "evil" faith, suspicion and hostility toward it persisted among both government officials and population. At the same time, however, Christian institutions began to offer access to Western knowledge alongside religious teachings, attracting many former samurai who saw in them an opportunity to rebuild their careers and contribute to national modernization.[328]

Christian Love in Popular Culture

[322] Megumi Watanabe, *Modern Diffusion of Christianity in Japan: How Japanese View Christianity* (Master's thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2004).
[323] Joseph J. Spae, "The Catholic Church in Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4 (1963): 3–78.
[324] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[325] Otis Cary, *A History of Christianity in Japan* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909).
[326] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[327] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[328] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

New ideas of romantic love began to develop after Japan's first encounter with Christianity. From the sixteenth century onwards, Jesuit missionaries became increasingly present in elite Japanese circles. Possessing literary skills and free access to courts and domains, they relied on preaching and storytelling to spread Chirstian values, adapting European story patterns to local contexts.[329] Some of these stories were created through collaboration between Italian missionaries and Japanese Christians, the *Cinderella* cycle a good example of this exchange. These tales celebrated Christian daimyo and noblewomen and promoted a message centered on love.[330] By embedding Christian themes within familiar settings, almost always shaped by Buddhist and Shinto traditions, Jesuits gradually introduced new ways of defining interpersonal dynamics and romantic love.[331]

When nineteenth-century Japan deliberately turned toward the West, the conditions were finally in place for earlier influences to assume a clearer and more defined shape, first within the language itself.[332] The word *ren'ai* (恋愛, implying "romantic love") entered public discourse, appearing in Christian writings, literary criticism, and, most importantly, popular magazines. Through these new channels, the term became associated with a new kind of awareness and to the idea of romantic affection as a mutual bond between two individuals.[333] Descriptions of Christian communities of the time suggest that some believers began to associate Christian fellowship with romantic love, linking affection between men and women to a modern type of relationship.[334]

As *ren'ai* spread, older Japanese terms began to change, or lose, their meanings. Given the existing vocabulary, it might have seemed natural to translate the Western idea of "love" as *iro* (色, implying "sensual love") or *koi* (恋, implying "love as sorrow"). Yet neither term fully aligned with the moral and social ideals that Meiji intellectuals aspired to promote. Traditionally, *koi* conveyed an intimate kind of longing often marked by melancholy and sexual overtones, a nuance that still remains in the *ren'ai* compound, but too narrow to represent a modern, Westernized, romantic attachment.[335] Similarly, *iro* had, until the Tokugawa period, defined love as a sacred, sexual experience, as an act

[329] Chieko Irie Mulhern, "Analysis of Cinderella Motifs, Italian and Japanese," *Asian Folklore Studies* 44 (1985): 1–37.
[330] Chieko Irie Mulhern, "Cinderella and the Jesuits: An Otogizōshi Cycle as Christian Literature," *Monumenta Nipponica* 34 (1979): 409–447.
[331] Chieko Irie Mulhern, "Analysis of Cinderella Motifs, Italian and Japanese," *Asian Folklore Studies* 44 (1985): 1–37.
[332] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[333] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[334] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.
[335] Ferenc Takó, "Forms of Love and the Family in Watsuji Tetsurō's Thought," (2026): 49–71.

that could transcend everyday life.[336] It did not focus on chastity or on the pursuit of the ideal marriage partner; rather, it usually existed outside marriage and focused on the pleasures of the act itself.[337] With the growing influence of Christian morals, *iro* gradually lost this positive cultural value and started to be perceived as a vulgar and uncivilized word: the sexual vitality that survived until the Edo period, linked to a fusion of sensual and sacred, slowly faded away from collective memory, leaving *iro* as an unsuitable translation for the morally elevated and companionate form of love that Meiji intellectuals wanted to promote.[338]

The whole semantic field of intimacy was now being reorganized: the diverse vocabulary of *iro*, including *koi*, *nasake* (情, implying "love as tenderness"), *irogonomi* (色好み, implying "love as sensitivity and insatiable desire") and many more, was gradually compressed into a single moral opposition where all non-Christian forms of love were reduced to lust. What emerged was a unified idea of "love," but this clarity came at the cost of the layered meanings and cultural richness carried by these earlier terms.[339]

Within this shifting landscape, Meiji intellectuals deliberately avoided *iro* and increasingly favored *ai* (愛, implying "love as care") as a more suitable option.[340] Although *ai* had previously been linked to Buddhist notions of attachment and desire, it was gradually reinterpreted through biblical ideas of love for God and for one's neighbor.[341] In everyday usage, *ai* traditionally referred to bonds between parent and child, between friends,[342] or to broader expressions of affection.[343] At the same time, however, it began to absorb new connotations and it increasingly came to be used to imply this new kind of westernized romantic love.

In novels and short stories, this new form of love was clearly different from earlier Confucian or Buddhist views, shifting attention away from moral obligations, focusing more on the bond

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[336] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[337] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.
[338] Yūko Tanaka (田中優子), review of *'Iro' to 'Ai' no Hikaku Bunkashi (「色」と「愛」の比較文化史)* by Junko Saeki (佐伯順子), *Hikaku Bungaku* (*Comparative Literature*) 41 (1998): 135–140.
[339] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[340] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[341] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[342] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[343] Ferenc Takó, "Forms of Love and the Family in Watsuji Tetsurō's Thought," (2026): 49–71.

between a man and a woman.[344] Victorian ideals of chastity, marriage, and companionate partnership, deeply influenced by Christian morality, played an important role in reshaping gender relations in Meiji Japan and in preparing the linguistic ground for a new understanding of romantic love.[345] As these moral and social ideals gained influence, the word *ren'ai* entered public discourse.

The term first appeared in print in 1870 in Nakamura Masanao's (1832-1891) translation of Samuel Smiles' (1812-1904) *Self-Help*, and from the 1870s onward it was increasingly used to translate the English word "love" in the specific sense of romantic affection between a man and a woman. By the second half of the Meiji period, this new vocabulary reflected a broader reorganization of ideas about love, marriage, and the social role of women, shaped also by popular literature and the growing influence of newspapers.[346]

Within this emerging discourse, romantic love was rarely presented as an end in itself. Instead, middle-class editors, writers, and readers tried to make *ren'ai* a fundamental aspect in the development of the modern individual, stressing its temporary and preparatory nature and describing the initial "intuitive attraction" of *ren'ai* only as the first step toward marriage. This early stage would eventually lead to deeper forms of shared affection and, ultimately, to a higher duty of service to society.[347]

This new understanding of love was apparent in journals aimed at educated readers. In *Jogaku Zasshi* (女学雑誌, "Education of Women Magazine"), for example, the concept of true love was presented as a refined bond based on mutual respect between husband and wife, implicitly framing physical intimacy as something morally inferior.[348] In *Shufu no Tomo* (主婦の友, "Housewife's Friend"), readers described their ideal husbands as dependable and understanding men, guided by religious belief and generosity of spirit, often imagined as teachers or company employees, in line with middle-class aspirations of that time. Some readers even identified the ideal family as consisting of just two people, revealing the growing importance of the married couple over the extended family that had long supported the patriarchal *ie system*.[349] This new vision of love reached an even wider

[344] Ferenc Takó, "Forms of Love and the Family in Watsuji Tetsurō's Thought," (2026): 49–71.
[345] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.
[346] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[347] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[348] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[349] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.

audience through mass-circulation magazines such as *Taiyō* (太陽, "The Sun"), which targeted middle-class graduates and regularly featured columns on literature, education, women, and the home.[350] By the 1920s, women's magazines had broadly adopted this approach, encouraging young readers to actively look for a romantic love match.[351]

The idea of romantic love found its clearest expression in the rise of *ren'ai shōsetsu*, romantic love novels. By the late Meiji period, these books had become so popular among young readers that "there was not a desk of a male or female student without a romantic love novel sitting on it."[352] These novels portrayed the pursuit of romantic attachment and the obstacles that stood in its way, such as social status differences, meddlesome families, or the unpredictable twists of fate. While these obstacles were often depicted as major issues, the narratives also suggested that they could be overcome, reinforcing the idea that romantic love could justify endurance and personal choice.[353]

Within this literary landscape, poet and essayist Kitamura Tōkoku (1868–1894) emerged as an influential voice. He famously declared that "love is the key to life's secrets," portraying love as a mirror through which the individual could find their "true self," and effectively framing *ren'ai* as essential to personal identity.[354]

The influence of *ren'ai shōsetsu* continued to shape how people imagined love and marriage in everyday life throughout the twentieth century. While many scholars identify the postwar period as a decisive moment in the formation of modern romantic relationships, this change can also be understood as a continuation of prewar patterns. By the 1970s, new ideals such as the *tomodachi-fūfu* (友達夫婦, lit. "friends-couple"), which emphasized companionship and mutual affection, reshaped marriage once again, presenting it as an evolution and continuation of romantic love.[355]

Enduring Gender Gap

[350] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[351] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[352] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[353] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[354] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[355] Dalit Bloch, "A Room of Their Own: Time, Space, and the Self-Perceptions of Married Couples in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 41 (2011): 72–101.

Rather than marking a clear break from the past, during the Meiji period ideals of romantic love clashed with older and persistent gender hierarchies. *Ren'ai* indeed spread rapidly through magazines, novels, and public discourses, but everyday social realities changed far more slowly.

Even after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the legal system continued to allow adultery, clearly favoring men: husbands could freely divorce and keep multiple concubines, while women were criminally prosecuted for extramarital affairs until 1947. This legal framework rested on previously investigated Confucian traditions[356] and Catholic teachings from the sixteenth century did little to improve women's situation, sharing the Confucian assumption of female subordination. Even missionaries themselves rarely defended women who were either concubines, abused, or unfairly divorced by their Christian husbands.[357] At the same time, popular literature continued to present love affairs as a search for personal freedom and emotional fulfillment.[358] It was only with nineteenth-century Japanese Christian activists that this imbalance was openly criticized and declared "shameful in the eyes of the world," they were the first ones openly denouncing the legal system that imposed female fidelity while tacitly permitting male infidelity.[359] Even after postwar reforms ended gender-biased prosecution, real improvements in women's legal and social status took much longer to achieve, highlighting the gap between romantic ideals and everyday life.[360]

The development of male-female relationships in modern Japan therefore unfolded slowly and unevenly. Opportunities for interaction were scarce, and social conventions strictly regulated gender dynamics. In the early phases of modernization, most encounters were limited to formal or seasonal occasions such as New Year's *karuta* gatherings, which provided rare moments of interaction between men and women.[361]

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[356] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[357] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[358] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.
[359] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.
[360] Haruko Nawata Ward, "Jesuit Encounters with Confucianism in Early Modern Japan," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1045–1067.
[361] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.

Older hierarchies and social conventions persisted long into the Meiji period. Male students still treated male-female interactions with embarrassment and hesitation, attitudes that reveal not only the lack of parity between the sexes, but also a deeper reluctance to truly bond with women.[362]

Among Western-educated elites, Christian networks offered small opportunities for men and women to interact, while mission schools for girls promoted models of Christian home life that emphasized marriage as a partnership between equals.[363] Gradually, this distance began to narrow. In the years following 1921, romantic love gained a more stable place in the modern imagination, supported by public discourse and by the growing presence of an educated middle class that considered love as a natural part of a modern lifestyle. Romance became something to be pursued and debated. New questions arose about male-female dynamics, the slow decline of unquestioned arranged marriage, and about the increase of places where both sexes could gather and interact, such as cafés, dance halls, trains, and cinemas. These concerns resonated widely because they were promoted by the emerging bourgeoisie of the 1920s, eager to embrace modernity in all its nuances.[364]

These ideas were expressed clearly by Christian intellectual Riichirō Hoashi (1881-1963), who described a gradual shift from the traditional family structure toward the modern "home." In the past, husband and wife had been subordinate to the *ie system*, but Hoashi argued that they were increasingly becoming a social unit of their own. A true home, he insisted, could not exist without a husband and a wife, and marriage pursued only to continue the family line spoiled the sanctity of marriage itself.[365]

With the redefinition of *ai*-love during the Meiji period, not only did the meaning of romantic love change, but men's perceptions of women also shifted. Romantic love was increasingly reframed as a largely platonic ideal,[366] shaped by Victorian middle-class culture, where sexual desire was portrayed as a degrading intrusion, something to be resisted and controlled by men and denied

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[362] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[363] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.
[364] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[365] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.
[366] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.

altogether by women.[367] Long reduced to objects of male desire,[368] women were now encouraged to pursue personal ambition and "free love" alongside education, personal development, and greater independence.[369] To many observers, new social figures such as the modern girl (モダンガール, *moga*), the working woman (職業婦, *shokugyō fujin*), and the "new woman" (新しい女, *atarashii onna*), represented a potential threat to the long-standing gender hierarchies of Japanese society.[370] As debates around these new figures unfolded, they began to reshape both public perceptions of women and women's own understanding of themselves.[371]

If the figure of the love-seeking woman revealed the anxieties and limits of the emerging romantic ideals, it also inspired reformist thinkers to imagine new ways of interaction for men and women. Journalist Kawada Rin'ya (?-1890) criticized Japanese male-female relationships for being still excessively enraptured by physical desire, arguing that true gender equality required a deeper transformation of everyday interactions. He suggested that if boys and girls were allowed to grow up together, talking freely, playing in the very same environments, and becoming familiar with each other's, mutual tenderness could develop and this familiarity, over time, could replace hierarchical relationships with companionship.[372]

Yet despite the growing rhetoric of companionate marriage, most middle-class couples continued to stick to clearly gendered roles, with men financially supporting the family and women managing the household.[373] In the postwar urban imagination, moreover, the family will often be depicted as revolving less around the marital bond and more around the relationship between mother and children, a dynamic that will persist in literature well into the late twentieth century.[374]

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[367] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.
[368] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[369] Yūko Tanaka (田中優子), review of *'Iro' to 'Ai' no Hikaku Bunkashi (「色」と「愛」の比較文化史)* by Junko Saeki (佐伯順子), *Hikaku Bungaku* (*Comparative Literature*) 41 (1998): 135–140.
[370] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[371] Yūko Tanaka (田中優子), review of *'Iro' to 'Ai' no Hikaku Bunkashi (「色」と「愛」の比較文化史)* by Junko Saeki (佐伯順子), *Hikaku Bungaku* (*Comparative Literature*) 41 (1998): 135–140.
[372] Jun Saeki and Irving Levy, "From Iro (Eros) to Ai = Love: The Case of Tsubouchi Shōyō," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (2008): 71–98.
[373] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[374] Dalit Bloch, "A Room of Their Own: Time, Space, and the Self-Perceptions of Married Couples in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 41 (2011): 72–101.

Changing Perspectives and Early Debates

The introduction of romantic love into Japanese society, linking love closely to ideas of progress and personal improvement, prompted a major rethinking of personal relationships. By the 1880s, Christian thinkers such as Iwamoto Yoshiharu (1863-1942) emphasized Christian love as the foundation of the husband-wife relationship and of family life. Iwamoto argued that marriages based on mutual respect and affection could bring couples great happiness and, at the same time, contribute to society's improvement. On the other side, he acknowledged the limits of this ideal, noting that free partner choice was still difficult to achieve, as most marriages were still arranged by the parents.[375]

All the while, among the middle classes romantic love was increasingly described as a natural human right.[376] Central to this shift was a rejection of the so called "external" distinctions, such as inherited status, physical appearance, or wealth, in favor of "internal", attainable, qualities like education, personality, and health. Throughout the 1920s, highly educated Japanese citizens increasingly prioritized internal attributes when seeking a marriage partner.[377] This new ideal of intimacy clearly reflected a democratic outlook, suggesting that anyone could pursue a partner without parental meddling or without being excluded because of social or economic status.[378]

Romantic love was increasingly described as a force that could foster deeper human connections. Left-leaning novelist Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951), for example, portrayed love both as "a striking growth of human individuality" and a strengthening of social awareness. In this view, love first trained the individual to care for their lover and then it gradually encouraged them to apply this approach towards family, community, society, and ultimately humanity as a whole,[379] a perspective that recalls certain older Confucian approaches.

This approach was also supported by literary critics such as Kuriyagawa Hakuson (1880-1923), who declared that *ren'ai* represented a modern pursuit that combined self-discovery with emotional connection. According to him, the search for a partner required individuals to self-reflect and confront their own selves and, because one comes to recognize oneself through the beloved, and to recognize

[375] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[376] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[377] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[378] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[379] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

the beloved within oneself, this creates a reciprocal process that deepens human connection and produces lasting self-fulfillment.[380]

Together with Kuriyagawa, pioneering feminist Yamada Waka (1879-1957) also described romantic love as a source of hidden social value. The two of them acknowledged love's darker sides rooted in the desire to seek pleasure through sexual intercourse, yet they argued that these emotions could be cleansed and directed toward positive ends. Properly understood and applied, love could cultivate the individual and benefit society as a whole. In this way, they challenged Taisho-era claims that romantic love was nothing but a destructive manifestation of "individualism."[381]

Romantic love's transformative power, however, was far from universally accepted. By the early 1920s, Japan had inherited a deeply divided debate that stretched back to the Meiji period, focused on whether romantic love was morally acceptable and compatible with modern nation-state needs.[382]

Kokumin no Tomo (国民の友, "Friend of the Nation") magazine's founder Tokutomi Soho (1863-1957), argued that *ren'ai* was incompatible with success, claiming that devotion to romantic love required the abandonment of ambition, while the pursuit of ambition demanded the renunciation of romantic love. He warned that love could enslave the individual, weakening discipline, purpose, and personal freedom. Medical authorities reinforced these concerns with figures such as Fujikawa Yu (1865-1940) describing romantic love as a form of emotional instability, linking it to poor judgment, mood swings, physical disturbances, and even antisocial, and occasionally criminal, behavior. In their view, love was not a source of moral growth but a potential threat to self-control and social order.[383]

These tensions raised an unresolved question: how could modern individuals pursue romantic fulfillment without destabilizing society? Those who viewed *ren'ai* as a base instinct rejected the idea that personal desire and social stability could coexist. On one side stood figures such as Iwamoto and other Christian activists, who presented romantic love as a sign of progress and civilized behavior. They praised the Western ideal of love as the highest form of human emotion and promoted the idea

[380] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[381] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[382] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.
[383] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

that marriage should be founded on mutual respect, empathy, and spiritual unity.[384] On the other side were a smaller group of critics who rejected the optimistic view of romantic love promoted by Christian intellectuals; they called for strict regulation of emotions as a way to preserve moral discipline and social order, warning that untamed romantic feelings could weaken ambition and self-control. [385]

Yet the growing appeal of romantic love could not easily be contained, and the promise of emotional connection inspired the middle class to imagine a future shaped by it. As poet Ogawa Mimei (1882-1961) expressed it, many came to believe that "somewhere in the world, there is a person who will truly love you." Romantic love was not yet universally accepted, nor did it immediately replace arranged marriages. Nevertheless, it gradually took root in the imagination of educated young men and women.[386] In the wake of widely publicized love affairs and scandals, Tokyoites increasingly remarked that the desire for romantic love had become one of the most pressing aspirations of modern life.[387]

Love Marriage Enters the Scene

By the 1910s, love marriage began to appear as a new romantic ideal, celebrated as the perfect partnership between a man and a woman. It was promoted not only in intellectual and Christian circles but also in popular culture, critics and historians calling this phenomenon the "love marriage ideology."[388] These ideas appeared in contemporary novels as well, reflecting how the new concept of love marriage (恋愛結婚, *ren'ai kekkon*) captured the imagination of people during the Taisho and early Showa periods. At its simplest, love marriage was understood as a union based on mutual affection, freely chosen by both partners, and by the mid-1920s, it had become a widespread cultural ideal.[389] Although it did not have enough influence to replace arranged marriage (見合い, *miai*) as

[384] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[385] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[386] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[387] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[388] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[389] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.

the main prewar marriage practice, love marriage was more and more admired and idealized as a progressive alternative.[390]

In the early 1920s, parts of the educated middle class joined intellectuals in arguing that, in Japan, expression of emotions was too restricted. They believed that older conventions and contemporary laws were the main obstacles preventing a more natural expression of feelings. Unmarried adults had to ask for parental approval in order to marry, this practice reinforced by the Meiji Civil Code, promulgated in 1896 and enforced in 1898, which required parental consent for men under thirty and women under twenty-five.[391]

Critics argued that, because of these rules, younger generations were increasingly frustrated; slowly but steadily though, the middle class, including critics, publishers, authors, and many liberal thinkers, including feminists, supported not only the ideal of love marriage, but also the approach that saw it as a way for women to define themselves beyond family obligations and to achieve equality.[392]

Yet the idealization of love marriage carried both hopes and risks, which young people had to navigate with care. A more balanced approach, some argued, could prevent extreme outcomes such as love suicides, impulsive marriages, or hasty divorces. On the other hand, many were drawn to this new dimension of love because it seemed to naturally allow countless opportunities to pursue romance, even after facing one or more disappointments. Kuriyagawa once again exhorted concerned readers to accept this modern dream, reminding them that "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."[393]

Failure was clearly a real and constant apprehension: the fear of choosing the wrong partner, the agitation of losing the right one, the dread of not finding a suitable match, they all appeared frequently in contemporary articles.[394] On the other hand, urban Japan now offered more spaces and opportunities for courtship and partnership: some earlier dating practices were introduced and young

[390] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[391] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[392] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.
[393] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[394] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

men and women could now meet and socialize (交際, *kōsai*), read and write romantic novels or letters, and even connect by shared interests in dance halls.[395]

The ultimate goal of romantic love was marriage and, as a resident of Fukuoka admitted: "I want to build my marriage on self-understanding and love," this mentality was becoming increasingly common. For many, in fact, marriage was becoming not only the result of romantic love, but also a path toward deeper individual growth. A resident of Hiroshima had a similar perspective: "Married life begins with love. [But] it deepens through combining love with mutual understanding […]" In this view, love had been transformed into an ennobling emotion, a powerful but temporary feeling that helped the individual achieve maturity and social responsibility.[396]

Romantic love started to be framed as both personally meaningful and socially valuable, something that newer generations tried to make feel safer, for themselves and for the society, while still allowing themselves the freedom to experience romantic affection and desire.[397]

After the 1920s, older generations' values were not completely rejected. Instead, parent-child dynamics in marriage decisions got recalibrated, allowing both sides to have an opinion on the matter. Achieving this balance became a form of democratic decision and, over time, this generation shaped a new model of marriage positioned between arranged marriage and love marriage, in which individual desire was no longer ignored, yet familial guidance was not entirely abandoned, working in tandem to shape marital choice.[398] This dynamics will clearly change in postwar period, but it will be left to future research.

[395] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[396] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle Class Identity in 1921 Japan," The Journal of Japanese Studies 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[397] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[398] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

Conclusion

In recent years, academic interest in romantic love has steadily grown. However, the study of this emotion, together with its representations, its transformations across centuries and cultures, and its meanings and values in contemporary world, is still underdeveloped. In this regard, I agree with Lindholm who, in his paper *Romantic Love and Anthropology*, notes a persistent hesitation toward the analytical study of romantic love.

I find particularly compelling his description of romantic love as something perceived sometimes as a form of mental disturbance, and yet, paradoxically, desired by everyone. According to Lindholm, if both falling in love and conditions such as depression are considered forms of "irrationality," and if their rational analysis is assumed to function as some kind of healing, then explaining and alleviating mental disorders sounds reasonable, while explaining romance does not.

This raises an interesting question: could it be that, because the great majority wish to experience a deep and overwhelming love, approaching it in a rational way might risk weakening its intensity? Perhaps, then, the study of love is unconsciously avoided, as if understanding it too clearly could lead to its disappearance.[399] I cannot answer whether this fear can fully explain the relative scarcity of studies on romantic love evolution across the centuries in Asia or its impact in contemporary society. Nevertheless, it indeed offers a useful perspective and a meaningful starting point for understanding the long-standing ambivalence surrounding love as an academic subject outside the literary field.

This dissertation began by exploring the emergence and evolution of romantic love in Italy and, more broadly, in the cultural heart of Europe. It then gradually shifted towards Japan, tracing the religious and sometimes historical influences that shaped its understanding of love and romantic practices. Starting from Asuka and Nara period sources, the analysis identified some of the first definitions and practices associated with love. From there, this study traces their development over time, examining how they evolved alongside shifting religious influences. It also considers how each religious system represented romantic love, or similar concepts, and how these representations, in turn, shaped Japanese society. Rather than presenting love as a fixed or universal experience, this dissertation sought to show how deeply it is actually shaped by cultural and religious systems.

Throughout this work, it is always important to keep in mind that Eastern cultures, including Japan, have often been described as more collectivist, while Western societies such as Italy tend to

[399] Charles Lindholm, "Romantic Love and Anthropology," *Etnofoor* 19 (2006): 5–21.

emphasize individualism.[400] These orientations did not develop on their own, and despite not being directly approached within the dissertation, they also were shaped and reinforced by religious beliefs and social organization and, at the same time, they impacted love perceptions and dynamics across centuries.[401] Ultimately, approaching love through a historical, cultural, and religious lens does not diminish its power or its mystery. Instead, I believe it reveals love as a deeply human experience, one that is constantly reshaped by the societies in which it unfolds. To study love is not to reduce it through rational analysis, but to better understand the circumstances that allow it to be felt, expressed, limited, and transformed over time.

One of the first conclusions reached in this study concerns the most striking contrast between European and Japanese traditions of romantic love. This difference mainly lies in the strong influence of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian thought on European ideas of love, and in their near absence in Japan until the Meiji Restoration.[402] In terms of fundamental values, this divergence is clear. Even when Christian values were later introduced into Japanese society, they reflected a more contemporary Victorian interpretation of romantic feelings and gender dynamics rather than the older Judeo-Christian traditions that had shaped European conceptions of love for centuries.[403]

Taking a step back, we can observe that in ancient Japan romantic love between men and women was generally accepted as a natural phenomenon. Japanese culture often associated what was natural with what was pure, beautiful, and good; unlike in the European tradition, there was no strong moral division between body and spirit.[404] Additionally, Shinto traditions often gave greater importance to the feminine, while Japanese Buddhism and Confucianism tended to support male authority.[405] It is only with the arrival of Christianity and Westernization that a slightly more balanced but also more structured view of gender roles and dynamics began to emerge.

Through the analysis of the *Kojiki* and the *Man'yōshū* this dissertation traced some of the earliest representations of male-female relationships in ancient Japan and, although Shinto did not develop a formal definition of romantic love, these texts reveal a notable ease and fluidity in men and

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[400] Michael Argyle, Mark Henderson, Michael Bond, Yukiko Iizuka, and Alberto Contarello, "Cross-cultural Variations in Relationship Rules," *International Journal of Psychology* 21 (1986): 287–315.
[401] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[402] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," *Analecta Nipponica* (2011): 45–66.
[403] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.
[404] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[405] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.

women dynamics. The union of deities Izanami and Izanagi, for example, presents intimacy as a sacred and generative act, closely tied to world creation itself.[406]

At the same time, these sources introduce literary motifs that would persist across centuries: among them is the recurring image of the woman who waits for her beloved. The figure of Nunakapa-hime, who remains passive until she is chosen by the god Yatipoko, illustrates this early topos of female waiting, a pattern that would continue to shape later representations of romantic love and gender roles.[407] Importantly, there is no real proof that this role was limited to literary imagination, just as we cannot confirm that it fully reflected social realities. What does appear evident, however, is that more active forms of emotional and sexual expression were at times mediated through poetry which, as seen in the *Man'yōshū*, functioned as a key medium of expressing desire, intimacy, and longing.

The importance of poetic exchange between men and women was further reinforced by social practices such as the *utagaki*, poetry gatherings where verse was turned into a form of courtship and a way to show mutual interest without rigid gender roles. These events also provided a socially accepted space for erotic expression, suggesting that emotional and sexual exchange was not confined to the private sphere but was embedded in shared cultural practices.[408] Taken together, these Asuka and Nara periods sources reveal a conception of male-female love grounded in naturalness, ritual, and shared expression. At the same time, these ancient texts introduce patterns and gender dynamics that continued to evolve as Japanese society moved through later historical and religious changes.

From these early depictions of affection, the dissertation then turns to the arrival of Buddhism and to the ways in which love was reinterpreted within this new religious system. While Buddhism shares with Shinto the idea that emotions are part of human nature, in Buddhist thought feelings such as love and hatred are placed in the broader domain of desire, identified as the primary source of suffering, according to an interpretation rooted in the structure of the Four Noble Truths.[409]

Love and hatred are therefore seen as arising from the same impulse to grasp and possess, an impulse that keeps people tied to the never-ending cycle of rebirth. In this view, liberation comes from learning to control desire and eventually letting it go.[410] When Buddhism entered Japan, however, it adapted

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[406] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[407] Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1968).
[408] William E. Naff, "The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 1 (1979): 1–22.
[409] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[410] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.

to an environment already shaped by Shinto's more positive worldview. Its openness toward sexuality and natural impulses hence helped soften the stricter and more ascetic sides of Buddhist teachings.[411]

After outlining the Buddhist perception of love and desire, the analysis then moved from religious ideas to literary depictions through an exploration of the *Genji Monogatari*. Deeply influenced by both Shinto and Buddhist thought, the text portrays love in the aristocratic world of the Heian court. Through Prince Genji, romantic love experiences are shaped by empathy, polygamy, emotional sensitivity, and a constant awareness of life's impermanence.[412]

In the *Genji Monogatari* too, women are left waiting for male attention, often limited or withdrawn, and once again emotions are expressed and shared mainly through poetry,[413] patterns that continue throughout the Heian period. Although it is difficult to establish how closely literary representations reflect everyday life, it is reasonable to assume that the *Genji Monogatari*'s narrative maintained some connection with everyday romantic practices.

After exploring many different romantic dynamics between Genji and his lovers, this dissertation attempts to find Murasaki Shikibu own interpretation of the concept of true love which is based on the Shinto idea of *magokoro*, or "true heart" but understood through a Buddhist perspective.[414] This ideal becomes especially clear in the episode of the Third Princess Murasaki and in the exhortation that she should marry a man capable of sincere communication.[415] For the first time in Japanese literature, romantic love is presented as a feeling that should be revealed only to one's beloved, in a relationship built on trust and reciprocity.[416]

If Buddhism focused on the spiritual dimension of love, Confucianism turned to the social dynamics and hierarchies that shaped how man-woman relationships were understood. From the very beginning it was intended to regulate social dynamics and harmony within a community. Even if Confucianism definition is not always clear, it has sometimes been regarded as a religious system, which explains why it got covered in the third chapter of this dissertation.[417] Founded by Confucius,

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[411] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[412] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.
[413] Iwona Kosińska-Nielsen, "The Literary Image of Love in Japanese Court Culture," Analecta Nipponica (2011): 45–66.
[414] Thomas P. Kasulis, Shinto: The Way Home (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
[415] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[416] Avery Morrow, "The Tale of Genji: A Quest for the True Heart," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (2019): 101–107.
[417] John Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998): 46–79.

it promoted key values such as *ren*, usually translated as benevolence, and placed a strong emphasis on loving others and practicing filial piety: respect, care, and responsibility owed to one's parents.[418]

When Confucian thought reached Japan, it adapted to local needs, and it blended with existing values based on loyalty. Over time, it became an important support for the emerging *bakufu*, helping to shape a new government system and, especially, laws while reinforcing clear social and gender hierarchies.[419] In Edo Japan, these principles gradually entered everyday life: the authority allowing husbands alone to request divorce, while leaving the wife often with neither protection nor compensation.[420] In a society where gender roles were clearly defined, daughters were expected to accept the decisions of the male head of the household without complaints[421] as filial piety, always directed toward the father, naturally reinforced male authority.[422] Within the *ie system*, the continuity of the family line took priority above everything else, and marriage was rarely the result of personal desire.[423]

As these values continued to develop, they merged with Buddhist ideas and later contributed to the formation of the Meiji ideal of *ryōsai kenbo*, a model that shaped expectations of women long after the Edo period ended.[424] In this historical time, romantic love was no longer openly portrayed; on the contrary, it came to be viewed as something potentially disruptive, a force that had to be controlled by social norms rather than freely expressed.[425]

The focus finally turns to the modern period, where Confucian patterns, though still present, were progressively reshaped by Christian influences, significantly contributing to contemporary Japanese notions of romantic love. This observation is supported, in part, by a small questionnaire I recently conducted. All participants gave informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed. One of

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[418] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[419] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102–11.
[420] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.
[421] Harry Dauer, "Confucianism and Its Influence on Marriage in Japan under the Meiji Civil Code and the Post-War Constitution," *Kyōto Joshi Daigaku Jinbungakkai* 京都女子大学人文学会 (2006): 87–95.
[422] Donghyun Kim, "The Concept of Filial Piety in East Asian Confucian Culture from the Perspectives of Gadamer and Habermas," *Kritika Kultura* 33 (2019): 36–64.
[423] Dalit Bloch, "A Room of Their Own: Time, Space, and the Self Perceptions of Married Couples in Japan," U.S. Japan Women's Journal 41 (2011): 72–101.
[424] Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Confucian Morals and the Making of a 'Good Wife and Wise Mother': From 'Between Husband and Wife There Is Distinction' to 'As Husbands and Wives Be Harmonious,'" Social Science Japan Journal 13 (2010): 95–113.
[425] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.

the questions asked, *あなたの考えでは、恋愛関係の基盤となるものは何だと思いますか？* ("What do you believe is the basis of a romantic relationship?"). The most common responses emphasized trust and mutual respect and understanding, phrases such as *相互の尊重と受容* (mutual respect and acceptance), *信頼関係とお互いを理解しようとする努力* (mutual trust and a willingness to try to understand each other), and more responses highlighting the importance of honest communication.

Another question, *あなた自身の経験に基づいて、「愛」とは何だと定義しますか？* ("Based on your own experience, how would you define "love"?"), frequently resulted in answers that pointed to *おもいやり* (compassion), *見返りなく与えたいと思う気持ち* (the desire to give without expecting anything in return), and *相手への絶対的信頼* (unconditional trust towards the partner). These responses suggest that contemporary Japanese ideas of romantic love place great value on qualities such as trust, care, and reciprocity. At the same time, I believe they reflect the country's historical encounters over the nineteenth century with Western modernization and with the gradual influence of Christian ideals.

Japan first encounter with Christianity dates back to 1549, when it gained some support because it aligned with the political interests of powerful warlords.[426] However, it was soon persecuted and banned, remaining suppressed until 1873.[427] When circumstances finally changed, more than two centuries later, Christian faith returned with renewed influence, framing love and hate as opposing forces for the first time in Japanese history.[428] It was around this period that the word *ren'ai* entered public discourse, introducing a new understanding of romantic affection as a bond based on mutual support and empathy between two people.[429]

Some of the responses from my recent questionnaire share similar views. One participant noted:

> *"Since this is the person you spend the most time with, it's important that they aren't someone who makes you feel drained, but rather someone with whom you can be your true*

[426] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[427] Maeri Megumi, *Religion, Nation, Art: Christianity and Modern Japanese Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[428] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," *Current Psychology* 43 (2024): 1994–2004.
[429] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.

self and feel emotionally supported. I also personally think that being physically attracted to them increases the frequency of happy moments."[430]
(Male participant, 20–35 years old)

Another wrote:

"When walking through life together, especially during difficult times, it is important to empathize, offer advice, and support one another."[431]
(Female participant, 20–35 years old)

This new vision of love spread widely through popular mass-circulation magazines.[432] Yet, even as this idea entered everyday language and the literary world, the development of male-female relationships in modern Japan remained slow and uneven. Opportunities to meet were limited, and Christian networks offered only small spaces for social interactions.[433] Slowly but steadily however, despite many debates and re-appraisals, romantic love began to be seen more and more as a natural right among the rising middle class.[434]

Clearly, the ultimate goal of romantic love was marriage.[435] By the 1910s, love marriage began to be celebrated as a new ideal, promoted not only by intellectuals and Christian groups but also in popular culture, spreading the "love marriage ideology" trend across the country.[436] For the first time in Japanese history, people were encouraged, at least in theory, to prioritize personal compatibility and emotional connection over family status, looks, or wealth. Younger generations thus began to focus on qualities such as education, personality, and health when choosing a partner.[437]

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[430] From the survey: 1 番長く時間を共に過ごす人なので、一緒にいて疲れる人ではなく、ありのままの自分で居られる人が大事で、情緒的に支えられる人がよい。 また、外見もタイプであることが、幸せを感じる頻度もあがると個人的には思う。

[431] From the survey: 共に人生を歩む上で、特に辛い時に共感し、助言をし、支えることが重要だと思うため。

[432] Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the 'Taiyō' Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 79–103.

[433] Helen Ballhatchet, "Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 177–201.

[434] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

[435] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

[436] Michiko Suzuki, "Progress and Love Marriage: Rereading Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Chijin no ai*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 (2005): 357–384.

[437] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.

Responses from my questionnaire reinforce this as many participants noted that family influence over choosing a partner has weakened compared to previous generations. As one respondent said:

> *"I think there is very little family interference today. In some traditional families, partner choice may still take family background into account, but in most households, people now choose their romantic partner themselves."*[438]
> (Male participant, 20–35 years old)

Throughout the 1920s, the concept of romantic love as a powerful force for personal growth and social improvement sparked lively debates among intellectuals. Yet once the thought that "somewhere in the world, there is a person who will truly love you" took hold, it became impossible to stop the social changes that spread the notion of romantic love across Japan.[439]

After tracing these religious and cultural influences, it is worth reflecting on how contemporary Japanese society continues to carry traces of this development by mentioning some more answers I collected. Today, there are three main words in Japanese used to express what we call "love": *ai* (愛, implying "love as care"), *koi* (恋, implying "love as affection and desire"), and the compound *ren'ai* (恋愛, implying "romantic love"), each reflecting different historical layers and nuances of affection.[440]

At the same time, in a modernized and increasingly cosmopolitan world, traditions are constantly changing. Growing up in a three-generational household, once common in Japan, is no longer the norm. Today, about seventy percent of families are nuclear, made up only of parents and children, while many grandparents live alone or just with their spouse.[441] Nevertheless, it seems that the legacy of the *ie system* has not completely disappeared. My survey suggests that in large urban

[438] From the survey: ほとんどないと思う。一部の伝統的な家庭では、恋愛や結婚の相手を、家柄を重視して決めることもあると思うが、大多数の家庭では、恋愛の相手は当事者が決めるようになっている。
[439] Mark Jones, "An Outbreak of Emotion: Romantic Love and Middle-Class Identity in 1921 Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 305–338.
[440] Ferenc Takó, "Notions of Love in Shinto and Buddhist Thought," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (2019): 157–190.
[441] Robert Strom, Shirley Strom, Pat Collinsworth, Saburo Sato, Katsuko Makino, Yasuyuki Sasaki, Hiroko Sasaki, and Norihiro Nishio, "Intergenerational Relationships in Japanese Families," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 26 (1996): 1–15.

centers like Tokyo, its influence is minimal. But in more regional areas, marrying the eldest son can still carry the expectation of living with one's in-laws and preparing for eventual caregiving tasks.[442]

As Bloch argued, husbands and wives have always existed in Japan, but the meaning of their relationships has shifted over time. In the past, marriage was more hierarchical, guided by strict social norms and strong family pressure, rather than the modern ideal of a romantic partnership built on mutual choice and affection.[443]

Several participants explicitly noted how their views differ from those of their parents' generation. One respondent explained:

> *"I feel differently from my parents. They see happiness in marrying early, valuing stability and what is considered 'normal.' For me, it feels more important to build my own life, establish my role in society, and invest time and effort in my dreams. My parents' generation took pride in the approval of friends, acquaintances, and relatives but for our generation, pride can come later, with personal growth and while staying true to ourselves. More people now believe that ambition and integrity matter more than immediate social recognition."*[444]
> (Female participant, 51–75 years old)

Others observed that the pressure to marry has weakened. Remaining single is increasingly seen as a legitimate personal choice, rather than a social failure (Male participant, 20–35 years old).[445] At the same time, some respondents still perceived that older generations tend to prioritize social appearance and public opinion over individual feelings, whereas younger people place greater value on authenticity and sincerity (Female participant, 20–35 years old).[446]

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[442] From the survey: 家長制度など、東京に暮らしている限りは全く影響はありませんが、地方では長男と結婚した際には義理家族との同居や介護などを覚悟しなければならないので、真剣な関係性においては大きく影響があると思います。

[443] Dalit Bloch, "A Room of Their Own: Time, Space, and the Self-Perceptions of Married Couples in Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 41 (2011): 72–101.

[444] From the survey: 異なると感じる。 親は　当たり前　や　安定を望むので 早く結婚する事が幸せと思ってる(思ってた) 私はまず自分の社会的な役割を持つ、自分の生活を自分で立てる事、夢に労力と時間を掛ける事を先にすべきと想う。 最初から親の友人知人親戚からの評価が高いほど誇らしいというのが親世代。 未来で誇らしくなればいい。向上心と 自分に誠実な気持ちが大事と考えるのは私達世代にも多くはなかったが、今はそう考える。

[445] From the survey: 一方で、変わっていることとしては、恋愛へのプレッシャーが弱まっていることが感じられる。恋愛というより結婚の話になるが、結婚しなくてはいけない、という社会的なプレッシャーは弱まり、個人の生き方として独身も尊重されるように変わっている気がする。

[446] From the survey: はい 親世代では、自分の気持ちよりも世間体を気にしていると感じる。

There are also some testimonies that can be better understood when placed within the enduring ideal of the *ryōsai kenbo* framework, which continues to shape social expectations, even if in more subtle ways than in the past. This model has long encouraged women to place the needs of the family above their own personal ambition. As a result, on one side some women feel hesitant about marriage nowadays, fearing that it may limit their autonomy or restrict their self-expression. In this sense, the growing acceptance of singlehood may also reflect a conscious or subconscious desire to maintain their own independence.[447]

On the other hand, the legacy of earlier Confucian and later Christian-influenced models of gender dynamics appears to persist in what is expected of men.[448] Even if these expectations have evolved through the decades, some traces are still visible in contemporary dating practices. Some participants noted, for example, that certain traditional assumptions are still present:

> *"[…]. Men are sometimes expected to pay for meals, escort their partner, and plan dates."*[449]
>
> (Male participant, 20–35 years old)

Such responses suggest that, while contemporary Japanese society allows greater flexibility in relationship styles, expectations for both men and women are shaped by historical ideals even now. These expectations may be less rigid than in the past, but they are still embedded into everyday practices and perceptions, adapting to new social contexts while reflecting older cultural patterns.

This never-ending reimagining of love and romantic practices has also influenced the sphere of sexuality. On one hand, sexuality in Japan has long been marked by restraint and, in some contexts, even stigmatized.[450] On the other, the idea of sexual compatibility has become more approachable and less of a taboo than in previous generations. Some questionnaire responses suggest that attitudes toward chastity and intimacy are becoming more flexible, although they still differ greatly from person to person (Female participant, 51–75 years old). Several participants noted that intellectual connection and shared values are essential for a lasting relationship, but they also acknowledged that

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[447] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.

[448] Shiori Nomura-Ichimasa, "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines," Eigo Eibei Bungaku 英語英米文学 (2019): 87–111.

[449] From the survey: ある程度ある。男性の場合、時々ご飯などのお金を出す、相手をエスコートする、デートプランを立てるなど。

[450] Yūko Tanaka (田中優子), review of *'Iro' to 'Ai' no Hikaku Bunkashi (「色」と「愛」の比較文化史)* by Junko Saeki (佐伯順子), *Hikaku Bungaku* (*Comparative Literature*) 41 (1998): 135–140.

a certain degree of sexual compatibility contributes to the stability of the couple (Male participant, 20–35 years old). This suggests that sexuality is increasingly considered part of couple dynamics rather than something tacitly existing alongside marriage.[451]

Throughout the centuries, sexuality gradually lost its sacred and natural dimension. It was first labeled as improper and, somewhat paradoxically, it later became increasingly regulated by administrative law. Its perception has continued to shift over time, shaped by changing morality, social influences, and political forces. Yet contemporary perspectives on sexuality still carry the weight of the past and, sometimes, bring back old social tensions. Even today, the word *furin* (不倫, adultery) dominates public discourse, often appearing in media and social debates; according to Tanaka, in Japanese society, a quiet fascination with this kind of "forbidden freedom" seems to persist beneath the surface.[452] In this context, contemporary Japanese society apparently confirms once again how historical legacies and contemporary values are closely intertwined.

Taken together, all these responses confirm that the meaning of love, partnership, and romantic practices in contemporary Japan keeps evolving. Nowadays, it is molded by Confucian ethics, Buddhist thought, and later Western influences, each shaping it with varying intensity. By contrast, the direct influence of Shinto seems to have weakened considerably. Nevertheless, its role in softening Japanese Buddhist teachings on love appears to still be present[453] and Shinto marriage fashion is still the most widespread within the country.[454] At the same time, there is still limited research examining specifically Shinto influence on definitions and dynamics of romantic love in contemporary Japan, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

Despite the significant differences between ancient Japanese frameworks and European traditions, Western ideas seem to have actively entered Japanese society over the past century. This can be seen in contemporary discussions increasingly highlighting personal development, emotional

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[451] From the survey:

1. […] 日本人全体の貞操観念も緩くなった気がするが これも人により違う。
2. お互いに知的な交流を楽しめて、互いに成長できるためには、知性と価値観の一致が必要だと考えるから。一方で、ある程度性的な相性もある方がカップルとして長続きしそうな気がするので、それも必要。

[452] Yūko Tanaka (田中優子), review of *'Iro' to 'Ai' no Hikaku Bunkashi (「色」と「愛」の比較文化史)* by Junko Saeki (佐伯順子), *Hikaku Bungaku* (*Comparative Literature*) 41 (1998): 135–140.

[453] Katherine Aumer, Jun Sato, Marc Jaksuwijitkorn, Max Austli, Jack Krizizke, Michael A. Erickson, Kristin Gray, Noah Fugett, and R. Alexander Blake, "Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Influences on the Attitudes of Love and Hate," Current Psychology 43 (2024): 1994–2004.

[454] Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, "The Production of Tradition and Culture in the Japanese Wedding Enterprise," Ethnos 65 (2000): 33–55.

compatibility, and mutual understanding as central elements of a romantic relationship. Nevertheless, it also appears that certain core values and underlying beliefs may still differ when compared to European, and especially Italian, ones. While relational models show signs of convergence, deeper cultural assumptions about gender dynamics, women's roles, individuality, and family responsibility may continue to distinguish them.

Nowadays, younger generations are gradually reshaping their habits and relational practices. In doing so, they both influence society and are influenced by it. Observed in the context of Japan's traditional marriage model, this mutual influence highlights how long-standing patterns, focused on parenting and economic stability, may be shifting towards new patters placing more importance on romance and sexual fulfillment.[455] The responses gathered through my survey once again will become a starting point to reflect on how romantic relationships in Japan may continue to evolve in following years. Several participants observed that Japanese people have often been perceived as reserved in their expression of emotions. However, they also noted that younger generations seem to be rapidly changing. As Strom argues, compared to their elders, young Japanese people indeed seem more willing to express disagreement and engage with differing perspectives,[456] increasingly exposed to new ways of thinking and different relational models through social media platforms. The same participant also pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped personal values and expectations; this might have indirectly influenced how people think about partnership and everyday life. In parallel, dating apps provide new ways for people to meet and develop romantic relationships, making this another area worth exploring. (Female participant, 51–75 years old).[457]

Current developments may signal a gradual but steady shift in priorities, and new studies on these issues could be particularly relevant in a country like Japan, where birth rates have been falling for decades and attitudes towards relationships and family life still strongly influence society.[458] This

[455] Shigeru Iwakabe, "Loving in Secret, Grieving in Silence: Emotion-Focused Therapy with the Other Woman After an Affair in a Japanese Cultural Context," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2025): 97–105.
[456] Robert Strom, Shirley Strom, Pat Collinsworth, Saburo Sato, Katsuko Makino, Yasuyuki Sasaki, Hiroko Sasaki, and Norihiro Nishio, "Intergenerational Relationships in Japanese Families," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 26 (1996): 1–15.
[457] From the survey: 日本人は控えめな愛情表現をするように思われてきたが若い世代は SNS はじめメディアからの情報の流入で急速に変わってきている。今後はもっとだろう。 控えめ　恥じらい　そういった文化も残ればいいかもしれない。一部は残ると考える。 コロナ禍に変化した価値観もある。 日本人全体の貞操観念も緩くなった気がするが これも人により違う。
アプリや恋愛班組などアクセスの違いはあるが、根本は変わらないと思う。
性別によって期待される役割は薄くなっていると思う。 女性だから、男性だから、という考え方は無くなってきているように感じる。
[458] Masao Akagawa, "A Natural History Model of Low Birth Rate Issues in Japan since the 1990s," The American Sociologist 50 (2019): 300–314.

opens the door to a wide range of research possibilities in fields such as happiness studies and relationship studies. In a society that is slowly moving away from a strictly collectivist mindset and facing issues of social isolation,[459] such studies could help identify emotional challenges and offer new approaches to improve overall well-being. It is increasingly clear that economic support alone unlikely will reverse the persistent decline in birth rates.[460] Applying attachment theory and relationship research could help determine whether Japanese society has developed supportive strategies and environments for nurturing romantic relationships and possibly encourage higher birth rates, or whether current relational and social dynamics may ultimately prove insufficient.

I decided to start each chapter of this dissertation with a quotation from the *Divine Comedy*. My intention was to frame this work and to remind both myself and the readers of the perspective from which it was written. In this study, I aimed to analyze how romantic love in Japan has been portrayed, defined, and transformed across the centuries. At the same time, I am aware that these words, these interpretations, are ultimately my own. As an Italian, writing from my own historical and cultural context, inevitably shaped by Christian traditions, my understanding of romantic love is naturally filtered through my own experiences. The path I have traced is not the only one, not even the definitive one. It is simply the path that my eyes, shaped by my upbringing, my culture, and my perspective, have followed. I would welcome, and indeed greatly value, other studies that explore these changes from different perspectives, through other cultural lenses, and with other interpretive keys. In this sense, this dissertation hopes to be both a contribution and an invitation: a humble attempt to map the evolving meanings of romantic love, and a call for further research from diverse perspectives, recognizing that love, in all its forms, is as complex, varied, and human as the societies that experience it.

[459] Shiho Kino, Andrew Stickley, Yuki Arakawa, Masashige Saito, Tami Saito, and Naoki Kondo, "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Their Correlates in Older Japanese Adults," Psychogeriatrics 23, no. 3 (2023): 475–486.
[460] Yasuo Takao, "Policy-Oriented Understanding of Low Births: Why Cash Support Isn't Enough to Fix Japan's Low Birth Rate," Archives of Clinical Pediatrics (2024): 25–29.

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End Notes

To those who chase love;

To all the ones who run from it;

To those who love quietly, to those who are loud about it;

To the ones who open up their hearts, even if they already know the outcome;

To the ones who are still trying to put it into words;

To everyone who has too many;

To those looking for love, and to the ones who found it already;

To unexpected confessions, and new beginnings;

To who is afraid, and to the brave ones;

To those who have not yet experienced love, and will soon;

Remember, it is never a waste to fall in love;

To my days at Waseda University, to all the people I met there, and to all the shapes of love;

To my ordinary days at Ca' Foscari University, to the wonderful people that surround me;

To everyone I met in-between;

To be loved is to be seen.