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Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Literary Process in Early Meiji Japan: Tendencies, Milestones and
Accomplishments »

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Abstract

The establishment of a modern literary discourse in Meiji Japan required the creation of new and fundamentally different prose from the entertaining and didactic *gesaku* (戯作) of the Edo period or classical medieval literature of the Heian period. For creating this new kind of prose, Japanese literati needed to put in place new tools to recast and develop the modern Japanese literature.

First, they had to create a clear new literary language through which writers would be able to convey to their ideas to reader of all social strata regardless of their level of education. Second, they were led to "re-invent" the fiction into a specific genre of *shōsetsu* (小説), along with a canon and content. Third, they also had to work on changing traditional view of fiction-writing from the frivolous pursuit belonging to the entertainment world into a professional activity of social import, with its own high-minded milieu of writers and literary critics.

This reconfiguration of literary production took place at a time of deep social upheaval in Japan and with eyes fixed on modern European poetics, which - in its great variety - was difficult for Japanese authors to grapple with. For the success in the creation of new and original texts, Japanese writers were indebted to their experience of European authors' translations.

This talk will revisit the social history of Meiji literature, from the 1868 Restoration to the mid 80s. It will show how the formation of a new literary and critical discourse in Japan have been the fruit of not only processes internal to the literary world but was in many ways shaped by extra-literary phenomena such projects undertaken under the banner of "civilization and enlightenment" (文明開化), the movement for the unification of the spoken and written language (言文一致運動), and educational reforms, the development of journalism and the emergence of the professional literary milieu (文壇).