

Overall History

Portrait of Hell takes place in the city of Heian-kyo (present day Kyoto), during the late Heian Era. This period, which lasted from 794-1185, is best known for a cultural renaissance of painting, poetry and writing, and for a general atmosphere of peacefulness (Heian means 'peace' in Japanese), during which Japanese society was especially sensitive to acts of crime and murder.

Possibly the most important cultural advances came in the field of literature. With the emergence of a new writing form, the kana syllabary, which supplemented Chinese characters, Japanese literature evolved the novel as a literary form (The Tale of Genji), and produced new poetry (Iroha) and the modern Japanese national anthem (Kimi Ga Yo).

The downside to this peaceful period was that it was marred by poverty, famine and overall economic depression. The majority of the population in Japan during this time were extremely poor, while landowners, mainly the aristocracy and members of the royal court, enjoyed great luxury. These difficulties, which included the downfall of the government, the gradual disappearance of a currency system, and most importantly, a waning sense of nationalism, coincided with the political rise of the Fujiwara clan.

This period precedes the more popular (and more war-torn) feudal era of Japanese history that has been portrayed in countless films, the age of the Samurai. In fact, the late Heian period saw the emergence of the samurai class.

The Fujiwara clan was formed during the late Nara period (710-794) and rose to its political peak during the Heian Era. Historically, the descendants of the Fujiwara Hokke (Northern Fujiwara) acted as regents (Sessho for child emperors and Kampaku for adult emperors) and, in some instances became the sovereign rulers over their 'puppet' emperors. The Fujiwara clan intermarried and spread its lineage throughout the imperial court to gain power. Throughout the Heian period, the Fujiwara dominated Japanese politics from behind the scenes.

Fujiwara no Michinaga

The role of the paramount lord in the film is loosely based on Michinaga (966-1027), who claimed de-facto rule over Japan during his life. He became the most powerful member of the imperial court after he was appointed 'secretary' to the emperor and, under his authority, he handled all aspects of the government's affairs. During his private administration, Michinaga married four of his daughters into the imperial family as empresses, resulting in two nephews and two grandchildren becoming emperors, ensuring his power. Even though Michinaga officially became Sessho in 1016, he was successful in directing the affairs of the court before, during and after his official 'reign', which ended in 1019.

Michinaga's diary, Mido Kanpakuki, is considered a leading historical text of court life during his reign.

Buddhism

Buddhism arrived from China during the Heian period. Emperor Saga (809-823) helped establish the Shingon School of Buddhism in Heian and a close relationship flourished over the years between the Buddhist clergy and the imperial court.

“Please, sir. Pay me.”

During the scene when the paramount lord's retinue is hassling the old man, it may be interesting to note that he is selling liquor.

“Would you please allow me to paint the walls of Muryoju-in Temple?”

Of the many mansions and temples built by Michinaga, possibly his favorite was The Muryoju-in Temple, constructed in 1020. Built in honor of Amitabha, the Buddha in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, Michinaga conducted his daily prayers in the temple and eventually died inside its walls in 1027.

“You painted Goddess Kissho-ten as an ugly entertainer...”

In mythology, Kissho-ten is the beautiful Japanese goddess of wealth. Her younger sister, Kokuan-ten is the ugly goddess of poverty.

“...and you modeled Fudo Myo-o after an imprisoned outlaw.”

Fudo Myo-o is the Buddhist god of Fire and Wrath and the principle god of the Five Wrathful Kings of Mystic Knowledge that guard the four cardinal directions in Buddhism.

“The Emperor of Korea requests that you help him repel an invasion of lawless Khitans!”

During this period, the emperor of Korea, Hyeonjong of Goryeo (992-1031), was involved in a border war with the Khitans, an ethnic group that resided in the area of present day Mongolia.

Led by Emperor Shengzong of Liao, 400,000 Khitans invaded Korea and eventually captured the capital city of Kaesong. However, fearing that his supplies would become too stretched and seeing that the invasion had brought about no particular advantage, Shengzong withdrew his army and began to retreat to China.

Despite this, while the Khitans marched towards the Yalu River, Emperor Hyeonjong launched a counterattack that killed between 20,000 and 30,000 Khitan soldiers. After several more years of warfare, the Khitans were all but annihilated. The Liao Dynasty (originally the Empire of the Khitan) eventually lost power in 1125.

“Why, some of the women in my court are accomplished authors!”

This is probably a reference to The Tale of Genji, written just after the year 1000 A.D. by an aristocratic lady known today as Murasaki Shikibu. Also around this time, a lady named Sei Shonagon wrote The Pillow Book, which revealed observations of the imperial court.

“The world is mine... my prosperity lacks nothing... just as the moon is full.”

The poem the paramount lord recites in the film is the poem written by Michinaga in 1018, and exemplifies his feelings about his power.