**The development of the toilet in Japan. Alan Macfarlane**

The toilet does not appear to have been something new. It is probably that very early on, that is before the sixth century A.D. water was used to carry away excreta. 'Prof. Basil Hall Chamberlain, in his translation of "**Kojiki, or Records of Ancient Matters**", which runs back twelve hundred years or more, shows that in this record the latrine is mentioned several times as being away from the house, and as having been placed over running water, "whence, doubtless, the name **kahaya**, that is, **river-house**".'[1] But increasingly this was frowned upon, both because of the waste and the pollution. For instance in Edo (???) 'In 1648, city regulations required small huts and toilets along the banks of rivers to be torn down.'[2] Increasingly the toilet was built as a separate house, or room, near the dwelling. Models of late medieval Japanese villages in Chiba (??) historical museum show each house with a separate toilet in its garden. These were not for the nobility, whom Frederic refers to as having 'small huts erected well away from the living quarters above a latrine'[3] but just ordinary villagers.

Many of the distinctive features of the Japanese toilet, the cleanliness, the separation or urine and faeces, the use of paper, the washing of hands, is described in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese (???) visitor Rodriguez. He wrote that '...the Japanese "provide their guests with very clean privies set part in an unfrequented place far from the rooms...The interior of the privies is kept extremely clean and a perfume-pan and new paper cut for use are placed there. The privy is always clean without any bad smell, for when the guests depart the man in charge cleans it out if necessary and strews clean sand so that the place is left as if it had never been used. A ewer of clean water and other things needed for washing the hands are found nearby, for it is an invariable custom of both nobles and commoners to wash their hands every time after using the privy for their major and minor necessities." (Rodriguez)."[4] In the eighteenth century Thunberg likewise described the three essential features - the urinal, faeces drop and washing place. 'Each house has its **privy**; in the floor of which there is an oblong aperture, and it is over this aperture that the Japanese sit. At the side of the wall is a kind of a box, inclining obliquely outwards, into which they discharge their urine. Near it there is always a China vessel with water in it, with which, on these occasions, they never fail to wash their hands.'[5]

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[1]Morse, Latrines (xerox), 173

[2]Hanley, Sanitation (xerox), 11

[3] Frederic, Daily Life, p.87

[4]quoted in Hanley, Sanitation (xerox), 19

[5]Thunberg, Travels, iii, 281

Visitors in the nineteenth century gave further descriptions of the arrangements. Morse describes how 'In the country the privy is usually a little box-like affair removed from the house, the entrance closed half way up by a swinging door. In the city house of the better class it as at one corner of the house, usually at the end of the verandah, and sometimes there are two at diagonal corners.'[6] He was impressed by the discreteness of the outside. 'To the left is a verandah leading to the latrine, a good illustration of the artistic refinement of the Japanese in concealing what in a New England village usually forms an unsightly and conspicuous object.'[7]

Once inside, considerable trouble was taken to make the room as pleasant as possible. 'The interior of these apartments is usually simple, though sometimes presenting marvels of cabinet-work. Much skill and taste are often displayed in the approaches and exterior finish of these places.'[8] As for the way it worked, Morse describes how 'The inner compartment has a rectangular opening cut in the floor, and in the better class of privies this is provided with a cover having a long wooden handle. The woodwork about this opening is sometimes lacquered. Straw sandals or wooden clogs are often provided to be worn in this place.'[9] Underneath was the crucial article for receiving excrement. 'The receptacle in the privy consists of a half of an oil barell, or a large earthen vessel, sunk in the ground, with convenient access to it from the outside. This is emptied every few days by men who have their regular routes.'[10] Morse described the separation or urinal and faeces pan and the general delicacy of the surroundings. 'The urinal is usually of wood, though porcelain ones are often seen. The wooden ones are in the form of a tapering box secured against the wall of the closet. Sometimes sprays of a sweet-scented shrub are placed in these and often replaced. The refinement of the Japanese in these matters is shown by the various names applied by them to the privy, such as **Setsu-in**, snow-hide, **Chodzu-ba**, place to wash hands, **Ben-jo** and **Yo-ba**, place for business, **Koka**, back frame, etc.'[11] One puzzle is how women used these urinals. From Morse's description, and his picture of an urinal, [12] If urinals were of this shape,

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[6] Morse, Homes, p.228

[7] Morse, Day i, p.78

[8] Morse, Homes, p.230

[9] Morse, Homes, p.230

[10] Morse, Homes, p.231

[11] Morse, Latrines (xerox), 173

[12] Morse, Japanese Homes, Fig.219, p.230, which shows the bowl to be about 2-3 feet above the ground. On p.228 he

women would have had to stand up to urinate, though the shape would allow them to stand over the vessel. A curious insight into this problem is provided by a remark by Wernich to the effect that it was 'the custom among the women of the lower classes of making water in a standing position...'[13]

Morse knew of criticisms of this system. 'Rein also complains of the evil odours of the closet arrangements, though his complaints refer more particularly to the crowded inns...' but he replied by wondering, 'what the Japanese would think of similar features in Germany, where in the larger cities the closet may be seen opening directly into the front hall, and in some cases even from the dining-room!'[14] Or again, there were those who thought the arrangement unsanitary, for instance the English doctor Willis. 'In some the stench was offensive to a degree. A large tub, which is used as a urinal, is sunk in the earth at the corner of each house, the consequence is that the air of the house is always vitiated, and I fancy the sickly looks of the inmates may often by attributed to this unhealthy custom.'[15] Morse replied 'In the better class of private house in Japan, however, there is less annoyance and infinitely less danger from this source than is experienced in many houses of the wealthy in our great cities.'[16]

Two important elements here are the way in which the excrement is received and covered. Morse noted that 'in the better class of privies' there was a cover and this is also alluded to in the arrangements described by Beardsley and co.[17] Equally important was that light chaff 'wherein the filth loses itself instantly' which we have heard of in Kaempfer's account. The separation of faeces and urine is particularly important here. As Roberts points out with reference to night soil removal, 'In all these systems waste waters must be excluded from the closets. The drier the contents the more readily is offence minimised, the more easily is subsequent disposal effected.'[18]

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explicitly states that this picture represents the urinal, whose shape led it to be called after a flower, the 'morning glory'.

[13]Quoted in Untrodden Feilds of Anthropology, p.81.

[14] Morse, Homes, p.11

[15] Cortazzi, Willis, p.129

[16] Morse, Homes, p.228

[17] Beardsley, Village, p.88

[18]Roberts, Hygiene, 459

Particularly interesting is the apparently widespread and early practice of washing one's hands after going to the toilet. In the 1870's Morse went to the toilet and 'As I came away I noticed at the end of the verandah a pretty device: a large bamboo hanging down notched at the lower end, on which hung a bucket of water, and just above, a shallow bamboo dipper hanging fom a peg. Conveniences for rinsing the hands are found in every house.'[19] This was a peculiarity of the Japanese which had been noted by the Scottish philosopher Kames[20] who wrote that the Japanese 'finically cleanness' extended to their 'little houses, in which water is always at hand for washing after the operation'. He may well have been basing his surprised observation on the account of Japanese inns given by Kaempfer. Kaempfer noted that after using a toilet at a Japanese inn, people used 'a bason fill'd with water, to wash your hands after this business is over',[21] and we have seen that the same phenomenon was noted by earlier visitors.

A summary of many of the features of the Japanese toilet and the attitude of the Japanese towards it is provided by the great Japanese novelist Tanizaki, writing in 1933. 'Every time I am shown to an old, dimly lit, and, I would add, impeccably clean toilet in a Nara or Kyoto temple, I am impressed with the singular virtues of Japanese architecture...It always stands apart from the main building, at the end of a corridor, in a grove fragrant with leaves and moss.' It is here, he believes, that the ultimate meditations can take place and where, he suspects 'haiku poets over the ages have come by a great many of their ideas. Indeed one could with some justice claim that of all the elements of Japanese architecture, the toilet is the most aesthetic. Our forebears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance...Compared to Westerners, who regard the toilet as utterly unclean and avoid even the mention of it in polite conversation, we are far more sensible and certainly in better taste.' The 'absolute cleanliness' which is needed is one of the factors which makes those with a taste for traditional architecture 'agree that the Japanese toilet is perfection.'[22]

Two other features may be noted in passing, both concerning the important point of the cleanliness of the user. The first relates to the cleaning of the anus. According to Frederic, in the medieval period 'They wiped themselves clean either with small squares of paper or little wooden sticks (**sutegi**) which

[19] Morse, i, p.331 (see fig.273)

[20] Kames, Sketches, i, p.246

[21] Kaempfer, History, 2, p.324

[22] Tanizaki, Shadows, 3-5; for more recent accounts of Japanese toilets, see Engel, The Japanese House, 239-40; Ohnuki-Tierney, Illness, 30-1 (note)

they left on the spot.'[23] As we saw, Rodriguez in the sixteenth century noted the 'newspaper cut for use' in the privy. The plentiful supply of cheap paper in Japan from an early period, strong yet bio-degradable, suggests that the Japanese may well lay claim to the first widespread use, if not invention, of one of the world's most important manufactured objects, toilet paper. After such paper or sticks had been used, there was still the question of contamination of the hands, by way of which infection so often passes back to the mouth. Hence the arrangements described by Rodriguez, Kaempfer and Morse, whereby water was at hand and people were expected to wash their hands, is another important element of the equation.

[23] Frederick, Daily Life, p.87