

Viewing Scholarly Discourse in Studies of Japanese Mythology: The Perspective of a Japanologist Trained in Eastern Europe and Japan

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No matter whether one is looking from within or from outside, one's image of a culture is built up mainly from the standpoint of a worldview carried within one's own self. As a student of Japanese mythology, I find it quite difficult to conceive just how my outlook might be different if I were to investigate it from outside the country. Although I obtained my doctoral training in Japan, I have little doubt that the things which have struck me in the course of research here would have impressed me equally if I were not in Japan. The only difference I can suspect is that my approach to them might well be different if I had spent the same years studying and working somewhere other than in this country.

One way in which it might be significantly different is this: the main thing I have learned and am still learning in Japan is to respond to arguments that I do not agree with by reaching for understanding, rather than by opposition or disputation. Here I find it most profitable to begin with the words "it is probably only because of my poor knowledge, but I do not quite understand..." instead of expressing sharp disagreement. This is something I assume most if not all researchers of Japan within Japan share, or come to share at some point, in common. But this was a spot in my sunglasses, early on in my stay in Japan, that did not coincide in color with the Japanese glasses, and I had to analyze the difference to myself and accept or reject the Japanese way. I did not accept it simply because it would make it easier for me to communicate within Japan, but because I came to consider it a higher form of communication.

It is not that disputation has no place in the Japanese academy. When I

first came to Japan, a wave of criticism had just started to rise within the research on Japanese mythology. A circle of scholars of Japanese literature, of whom perhaps the most prominent were Yoshii Iwao 吉井巖, Kōnoshi Takamitsu 神野志隆光, and Mizubayashi Takeshi 水林彪, rejected the achievements of studies of *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihonshoki* 日本書紀 that had been carried out before the 1980s. They sharply questioned the received methods of approach to Japanese mythology, particularly in regard to usage of the ancient texts.

Opposing the predominant theory of formation of the records *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* on the basis of a mythology, the systematization of which had started several centuries earlier (the so-called *seiritsu ron* 成立論), Kōnoshi Takamitsu insists that it is the logic—call it cosmology—of each of the manuscripts that actually formats each of their stories about the world (or more concretely, the world of the emperor). He proposes the thesis of “pluralistic mythologization” (*tagenteki shinwaka* 多元的神話化), according to which *Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*, *Manyōshū* 万葉集, and *Sokui senmyō* 即位宣命 each represents a mythological text with a separate system. These texts suddenly appeared between the second half of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries, supporting the emperor in multiple dimensions (*tagenteki ni*). He also insists that we need to differentiate between the festivals (*saishi* 祭祀) regulated in *Jingi ryō* 神祇令 and the imperial myth of *Kojiki*. The mythological text and the festivals, he points out, were separate things during the first half of the eighth century, and came to be interwoven only during later historical periods (Kōnoshi 1999, p. 104).

I do not know how much this new approach, as well as the new way of argument, resonated among scholars of Japanese early literature and mythology outside of Japan. But I can testify as an eyewitness that in Japan it had a shattering effect. On the one hand, as is the case with any new theory, especially one expressed with enthusiasm, it definitely moved the studies of Japanese mythology and the ancient texts further along. Bringing vividness into a realm that was becoming too quiet and monotonous, it focused a fresh attention on them and opened space for research on a new level.

At the same time, I could see how the new paradigm made the

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majority, if not all, of the scholars who had devoted their lives to research on Japanese mythology and festivals look small and stale. It became difficult for them to proceed further with a theory that had been so severely rejected. To some extent, I think, they agreed with the new thesis, namely that *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* should be treated as narrations with different logic, and that the record of myths and the actual festivals (as some of those can be witnessed today) do not coincide in many respects. The last was something they had come to conclude during their numerous fieldwork trips, yet they had striven to rationalize this dissonance, rather than to confront head-on the interpretive problems arising from it. But most of all, it seemed to me as I observed them, the majority of mythology scholars were at a loss how to react to an argument expressed in a manner absolutely new to them. To be sure, there had been disputes within the field of mythology studies before then, but everyone had followed an uncodified but universally accepted etiquette and respected the principal theses of the others. These scholars had socialized themselves to build their own theories with delicate curbs and careful expressions, along the way voicing their profound admiration of others' previous achievements. The strategy of totally defeating earlier research, as though dealing with soldiers on a battlefield, was alien to them. As any theory, the new one had its weak points. Yet, although they saw these flaws clearly and wanted to confute them, they did not take up their pens and argue. Instead they bore the attacks with a smile, with the very Japanese feeling that one does not shout out the truth when it is plain to everyone.

By way of trying to make clearer to readers what the prevailing mode of discourse had been before Kōnoshi and Mizubayashi and others entered the field with their assertive, attacking style, I would like to say a little about a book review that appeared a few years ago (Ōta 2001). Written by a postgraduate student of Nara Women's University, it treated Mizubayashi's first major work on mythology. It exemplified very clearly the "Japanese" way I have referred to: stressing the understanding of what the author under review was trying to say, only hinting about the weak points, putting everything in a very delicate manner. According to the unspoken etiquette, the opposition may respond, but is supposed to answer delicately and with the utmost respect.

Upon my first encounter with the new wave in Japanese mythology, I felt a strong urge to respond in the same way the new theory had been proposed. I was ready to criticize it, to make a direct attempt to defeat it. But I was aware I was young and inexperienced. What I needed was knowledge, and I strived to accumulate it so that I could fight back. Maybe I never accumulated that knowledge, I don't know. Recently, however, I find myself more and more inclined to treat it with the words "I do not quite understand this and that, but it is obviously only because of my lack of knowledge."

I was asked by the organizers of this symposium to speak about the perspective—and not only *from* the perspective—of one who was trained in Japanology in both Eastern Europe and Japan. The topic is a little difficult. It implies a look at my own self and at my background and cultural environment, which have influenced my approach to studies. Though undoubtedly my own background and cultural experience affect me subconsciously, I have never deliberately tried to make them objects of reflection before. How has the fact that I was born and brought up in Eastern Europe, studied at a Russian university, and furthered my professional development in Japan influenced my identity and my research?

To start with the Bulgarian environment, I could point that growing up in a country that fed its children on communist ideas, it was natural for me to believe in those and even to cherish them. I believed that young people, no matter whether they came from the provinces or the capital, or from workers' or intellectuals' families, should be looked upon in the same way and have equal chances and opportunities. While I was in Bulgaria, I was too young and too much "within" to be able to see the difference between such principles—so democratic, though somehow idealistic—and the reality. Yet, at the same time, exactly during my high school years, the first small symptoms of change had already begun to sprout out. We were urged not to repeat ready-made phrases, but to express our own ideas and critical views. Criticism was starting to be considered healthy and necessary for further development, both of individuals and society. Indeed there may even have been too much, I now come to think, emphasis on the beneficial aspects of criticism. Of course, I was not supposed to know (and did not

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know) that this very critique was in actuality tightly controlled by the government. What I learned from that time, however, is to confidently express my point of view, and to think, rather than merely to remember and repeat. To my greatest benefit, I also had the luck to have Japan introduced to me by a scholar who was far from “typically Eastern European” in her way of thinking and outreach. While most East European scholars at the time kept their research within the boundaries established by the Russian authorities, reading very little Western research (and being encouraged or permitted mostly to falsely criticize it from the Marxist point of view—but I became aware of all this only later), Tsvetana Kristeva, as those of you who know her will not be surprised to hear, was even in those early days of her career very progressive-minded and open to the most advanced research in the field; she was a scholar in the international, true sense of this world. While she admired and appreciated highly the deserving Russian scholars, she had already made a definite step “out” toward the so-called “Western world.” My first view of Japan was of a highly refined culture, full of beauty. In part this is because I was seeing through Kristeva’s eyes. This inspired me to wish for a deeper understanding.

What was the further contribution to my development of the Eastern European environment? I should first of all point out that when I went to Russia to study, by pure luck I went to St. Petersburg University. This was of enormous importance for the formation of my approach, because, I soon came to learn, there has been a difference in values between the State University of Moscow and that of St. Petersburg. Although some very distinguished scholars of Japanese literature were gathered in Moscow and it would have been a definite advantage to be trained by them, on the whole the mood was much more, let me use an unconventional expression, propagandistic, than in Petersburg. Should I compare it in a sense with Tokyo and Kyoto? Even at that time the scholars of Petersburg bore the image of the “old” intellectual circles, the intelligentsia from the time of the kings. The libraries we used, though largely spoiled from the simplified ways—neglect, even—of communist times, still kept the elegant furniture of the pre-revolutionary era, and the bookshelves were full of old books, which could be accessed only on very rare occasions and with special permission. Some of the professors would be hinting of disagreement with

the current governmental ideas. And not only hint. The year I arrived in Petersburg was marked by the election of Gorbachev as president, and changes in ways of thinking were clearly perceptible. The professors readily enjoyed the chance for freedom. Now, in my wish to understand the way of thinking of the Japanese as deep as I could, I decided to start from the beginning and explore Japanese mythology in my graduation thesis. I wished to read in the original the first written sources of Japanese Thought, and to analyze it. (I should admit here that the task was more demanding than I had realized, and required so much of me that I actually couldn't proceed very far until rather recently.) A very interesting episode has remained in my head concerning my thesis and its presentation (the word used in Russian for the presentation is "defense"—one has to defend one's ideas against opponents). Each of my advisor's readings ended with the comment that I should use "more" citations from Marx and Lenin. I had used none. Being serious about any advice, I must admit I actually took *Capital* and other works—basic and even some less famous ones—off the shelf in an attempt to find suitable expressions concerning the myths of the East and specifically concerning *Kojiki*. Naturally, I could find nothing to satisfy me. So, at last I had to put it to the professor, with a sense of guilt, but firmly, that I could not start my thesis with a quotation of or reference to Lenin. But I could, I suggested, mention his name, and point out that prolific as he had been on almost every subject, there is no mention in his works about Japanese mythology, as far as my search has shown. My professor remarked that I was lucky—several years earlier, such a beginning would not have passed.

From what I have said perhaps you can see that fascination with someone who opposed the currently orthodox ideas, as well as a readiness to follow what I thought a good example, was the basic stream in the formation of my approach until my arrival to Japan.

It turned out that the topic I had so innocently chosen as a start toward probing the soul of Japan had exactly at that moment become a hotly disputed one. There were two reasons for this. One was the fact that recently some scholars had seen the necessity to take research on Japanese mythology beyond the narrow frames of just reading of the ancient texts, and were advocating an approach to Japanese myths as part of world (not

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just national) mythology. Post-World War II Japanese scholars had treated these myths with gingerly care, regarding them as having been compiled in an artificial manner by political reasons (not subject to free analysis for those political reasons). But shortly before I came to Japan the myths had been taken up by some scholars as material for comparative research and for research on the psychology of the Japanese. A big event was the critical dispute opened in the eighties that I discussed earlier, led by Yoshii, Kōnoshi, Mizubayashi, and a circle of scholars of Japanese literature who were dismissive of the achievements of earlier studies. As I have said, it is interesting to observe the manner in which the scholarly debate over approaches and interpretations was being, and continues to be, conducted. Having appeared on the stage with a spirit ready to oppose, as I already noted, at that time I was not astonished by this at all. I rather could not quite make it out why the dispute was so one-sided. It took me several years to start reading research literature more or less freely, during which time I became increasingly convinced that Kōnoshi had good grounds for his accusations, as well as aware that his arguments have weak points. At the same time, however, I found that his arguments couldn't wholly convince me.

I often asked why none of the prominent scholars or their students has attempted to refute the attacks of Kōnoshi and his fellow critics of the old work on mythology. While those to whom I put this question all agreed with a smile that such a counterargument should be necessary, nobody actually did anything. It all seemed very strange to me for many years, until I came to see at one point what was holding the opposition back. The dispute, with its harsh and direct critiques, had not been raised in the Japanese style. I suddenly realized that instead of directly opposing, most of the Japanese scholars of my acquaintance would rather praise opinions that differ from their own, and then expand their point of view, and leave it up to third parties to judge which of the arguments to accept. I wouldn't say that by having this dawn on me I have accepted this way as my own. Nevertheless it did appeal to me greatly, I should say, as a higher way of communication. One cannot so easily overcome the cultural background working on a subconscious level. But changes that I have probably still not fully recognized had also already taken place at that very subconscious

level. Actually, recently checking once again to see if there have really been no answers to the new approach, I found out that shortly before his death Matsumae Takeshi, one of the leading scholars of Japanese mythology in our time, had written a brief essay (only 2-3 pages) on this matter (Matsumae 1998 (1992)). And, reading it, I was again amazed by the elegant way he dealt with it. After presenting a comprehensive account of the research in the field, listing the names of works that are representative of each separate line of approach but without disparaging anyone's method directly (as does Kōnoshi Takamitsu), he expresses astonishment rather than resentment at the attempt, as he puts it, to bring the research on the ancient texts back to the post-war level in Japan, at a point when it had just come to begin matching the foreign research on mythology.

When he referred to the methods of foreign research adopted in Japan, Matsumae meant the comparative approach, and this is the way I was taught to treat materials by him and my other teachers in Japan. (Do I need to specify "Kansai"?) And starting from mythology, I have recently tried to expand my interest beyond those narrow limits, to the comparison of different aspects of Japanese and European culture. Thus far what I have done is just a beginning, with more experimenting than depth of research, so I am afraid to speak about it in definite terms here. What I could say a little more definitely is that I would like to take Jung's Collective Unconscious as a key structure and seek common features in the cultures on the two opposite sides of the ocean.

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