

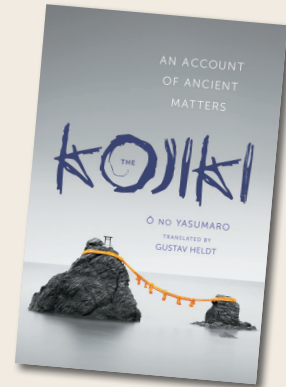
## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Kojiki:* *An Account of Ancient Matters*

Translated by Gustav Heldt

Columbia University Press, 2014  
xv + 279 pages.

Reviewed by ANDASSOVA Maral



The *Kojiki*, believed to have been written in 712, is the oldest Japanese written text. In contrast with the *Nihon shoki*, dating back to 720, the *Kojiki* was ignored during the medieval period. However, this changed in the Edo period, when *kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga published his *Kojiki-den*, an annotated version of the text. Following this, the *Kojiki* became well known.

During the late nineteenth century, B. H. Chamberlain arrived in Japan and encountered the *Kojiki*. He was the first scholar to translate this text into English. Chamberlain's translation was greatly influenced by the philologist research carried out by Motoori Norinaga. The next English translation appeared in 1968 by D. L. Philippi, and half a century later in 2014 Gustav Heldt has published the third translation. I would like to reflect here on the peculiarities of Heldt's translation and the issues that transpire from it.

The most notable peculiarity of Heldt's translation is that all proper nouns (that is, names of deities and place names) are translated into English, rather than being Romanized to preserve their original pronunciation. Heldt explains: "The chief reason I have attempted to translate the names of these individuals and places often lies at the heart of those 'ancient matters' (*koji*) of which the *Kojiki* is an 'account' (*ki*) set down in writing." He adds that "names and narratives were intimately intertwined in a world where speech and song often acted as spells, and where the terms *koto* or *ji* could refer both to 'words' as such and to 'matters' or 'phenomena' in a more general sense. The *Kojiki* often links ancient words to ancient matters with proper nouns that reflect specific actions or characteristics associated with the particular entities they designate" (p. xiv).

In other words, the *Kojiki* depicts a world where the term *koto* refers to both "words" and "phenomena." It is a magical world where the power of language is created through the medium of proper nouns. Undeniably, deities' names in the *Kojiki* are strongly linked to this magical world and Heldt's translation presents several good examples to illustrate this point.

One is given by Heldt himself in the story surrounding the marriage of Izanagi and Izanami. There, the two deities exchange marriage vows, becoming a couple and giving birth to several deities of islands and nature. By translating the two deities as "He Who Beckoned" and "She Who Beckoned," Heldt depicts clearly the mythological content in which they beckon each other and form the marriage. Another good example is the story

of the marriage between Hononinigi and the daughter of a mountain deity. There, the mountain deity points Hononinigi to his two daughters. Hononinigi then rejects the ugly older daughter, “Lady Lasting Rock,” favoring the beautiful younger daughter, “Lady Blooming Tree Blossoms,” and spends a night with her. However, the mountain deity promises Hononinigi eternal life for his older daughter, and prosperity for his younger. Thus, this myth explains how Hononinigi descended from Takamano-hara and came to lose eternal life in favor of prosperity. The English translations of the names of the two daughters, “Lady Blooming Tree Blossoms” and “Lady Lasting Rock,” perfectly conveys the magical power imbued in them. By translating the names into English, the content of the story makes a greater impact on readers.

However, these are rare cases, and most of the time deities possess more than a single meaning in their name. The *Kojiki* was written in Chinese characters transmitted from China, but it has a style of its own. It combines ideograms conveying meaning (*hyōi moji* 表意文字), and phonograms conveying sound (*hyō'on moji* 表音文字). This style allows for one word to possess several meanings. For example, let us focus on the world to which Izanami travelled after her death, Yomi no Kuni 黄泉国. It is written in Chinese characters 黄泉 (*kōsen*), but it is read *yomi* in the native Japanese. The Chinese characters represent the “underground world,” but their Japanese reading *yomi* represents *yami* (darkness) or *yama* (mountain). Thus, several theories are possible; one that sees Yomi no Kuni as an underground world, another as a world on top of a mountain, and finally one as a world connected on the same plane to the surface world.<sup>1</sup>

Heldt translates Yomi no Kuni as “land of the Underworld,” thus emphasizing its Chinese meaning. However, by doing so, his translation completely ignores the phonetic meaning conveyed by its Japanese reading. A translation is not only a task concerned in the meaning of a word, but also one that should consider the linguistic properties a particular word has. Thus, we should reflect on how best to translate the *Kojiki* without overlooking its peculiarity as a text that combines ideograms and phonograms.

Another example I would like to point to is the name of the river Sawi-gawa. Heldt translates this as “Lily River.” His reasoning is based on an annotation of the *Kojiki* that tells us that *sawi* was the ancient name for lily, borrowed from the area surrounding the river covered in lilies. However, the Chinese characters for *sawi* are 狭井. According to Nishimiya, 狭 does not signify “narrow,” as one might expect, but rather “recently spouting.” Therefore, 狭井 signifies “a well that has just recently started spouting water.”<sup>2</sup> Sawi-gawa is thus a river represented by this image. Moreover, in songs and annotations, *sawi* is written with the phonogram 佐草 (*sawi*), based on the verb *sayagu* 騒ぐ, signifying a “rustling or buzzing sound” suggesting “a threatening and dangerous” condition.<sup>3</sup> The river is also the place where Emperor Jinmu marries Isekeyori-hime, daughter of the deity of Yamato. Sawi-gawa can be interpreted then in a number of ways, and its interpretation of this river influences the meaning of Jinmu’s sacred marriage. By limiting the translation of Sawi-gawa to “Lily River,” Heldt overlooks its other meanings and interpretations.

---

1 Saigō 1967; Saijō 2005; Kōnoshi 1986.

2 Nishimiya 1979.

3 Nishimiya 1979.

Heldt himself admits he was forced to choose only one interpretation among the several meanings of each word in the *Kojiki*. This task must have been a daunting one. However, by only conveying one meaning, the translation limits the understanding of the reader and overlooks the complex linguistic world behind each proper noun. Upon quoting the *Kojiki*, researchers might need to adopt a different meaning or several different interpretations not included in Heldt's translation. When reflecting on this issue, Heldt's translation might be inappropriate for academic use. On the other hand, by conveying one specific meaning, Heldt's translation might be very well suited for beginners newly introduced to the world of the *Kojiki* and Japanese culture.

A translator faces a series of challenges. The first can be traced back to the diverse nature of the readership. A translation of a classic work like the *Kojiki* should both reflect the current fruits of academic scholarship, and also be easily accessible to a beginning reader. It is therefore an extremely difficult task. Another problem is presented by the complexity of translating the peculiar style of the *Kojiki* into another language. Translating is not just substituting words into a different language. It also requires conveying the nature, style, rhythm, and context imbued in the multifaceted world of the text. Heldt's translation of the *Kojiki* presents us with a multitude of important issues.

## REFERENCES

Kōnoshi 1986

Kōnoshi Takamitsu 神野志隆光. *Kojiki no sekaikan* 古事記の世界観. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1986.

Nishimiya 1979

Nishimiya Kazutami 西宮一民. "Jinmuki 'Kōgō sentei' jō no chūmon no shinshaku: Sawigawa to Sawigusa" 神武記「皇后選定」条の注文の新釈: さみ河とさみ草. *Kōgakkans Daigaku kiyō* 皇學館大学紀要 17 (1979), pp. 1–9.

Saigō 1967

Saigō Nobutsuna 西郷信綱. *Kojiki no sekai* 古事記の世界. Iwanami Shoten, 1967.

Saijō 2005

Saijō Tsutomu 西條勉. *Kojiki to ōke no keifugaku* 古事記と王家の系譜学. Kasama Shoin, 2005.