

Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2020 Semester

“The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (16)

Title: Japanese Mythology and Emperor in the Perspective of East Asia

In the last week of the semester, the Eurasia Foundation International Lectures invited Professor Hung-Yueh Lan, the associate researcher of the Academia Sinica, to give a lecture entitled “Japanese mythology and Emperors in the Perspective of East Asia.” Professor Lan’s major is history, modern intellectual history in particular. Professor Lan interprets the theme of this lecture from a macro perspective. He considered that the understanding and interpretation of history are subjectively interpreted; therefore, it is critical to cultivate the ability to think independently. Based on these thoughts, the speech leads the teachers and students to think about the relationships between Japanese and Chinese culture in Asia and the relationship between Japanese mythology and the Emperor. The content of the speech included the following four points.

1. What is Japan and East Asia? Chinese characters and the spread of culture

Professor Lan first started with the topic of Japanese literati painting and the screen of the “Orchid Pavilion Gathering (蘭亭曲水圖)” painted by Yosa Buson (與謝蕪村). He observed the fact that Yosa’s painting is related to Wen Zhengming’s the *Lanting ji Xu* (蘭亭集序, Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion) and a traditional game, *liúshāng* (流觴 or 曲水流觴 Qushui Liuzhou, “floating goblets”). Traditionally in Japan, there is a custom called “Nagashibina (流し雛, floating doll), which is the origin of the well-known Doll’s Day festival, “Hina Matsuri.” This festival is related to the festival held every March in ancient China, where people go to the river to bathe to remove bad luck. Professor Lan put forward three important points and questions: (1) The culture that we thought was very Japanese was not necessarily very Japanese. It may be influenced by Chinese culture, but is Chinese culture really far-reaching? (2) What is China? Its definition changes with language, region, and time. (3) What are East Asia and Asia? It is related to the spread of Chinese characters and Chinese. The concepts of East Asia and Asia were formed around the 19th century and the definition of East Asia can be traced back to the medium of Chinese characters and Chinese. Take the Japanese era name “*Reiwa* 令和” as an example. The “era name” was also passed from China to Japan. The fact that “*Reiwa*” was taken from the oldest collection of poems in Japan, *the Manyōshū* (万葉集, “Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves”), not

from *the Shih-ching* (詩經, “Classic of Poetry”) originated from China might be based on a nationalistic projection. However, the poems in the *Manyōshū* actually quoted many Chinese classics and their relevance with Chinese culture is difficult to separate.

2. The “God” of the Ancient Japanese

Professor Lan quoted the arguments from Motoori Norinaga, a scholar of *Kokugaku* (國學, “national study”) from the Edo period, who defined God as “an object of extraordinary virtue (ability, power that transcends nature) and worthy of respect.” The use of the Chinese character “God” in the Japanese *kunyomi* (訓読み) is indeed similar to the usage in ancient Chinese that treat “*Guǐ* (鬼, Ghost),” “*shén* (神, God),” and “*Guǐshén* (鬼神, ghosts and gods)” as “God.” The word “God” also sometimes equals to the word “*Diàn* (電, Electricity),” because the deity of thunder and lightning usually derived into “Heaven (天)” and “Emperor (帝),” referring to phenomena, effects, and abilities that are magical and incredible. General beliefs in Taiwan, like the belief in Mazu, worship historical figures who have high moral standards as gods. Compared with this, Japanese gods usually have more magical power beyond nature. The gods of ancient Japan originated from the natural beliefs of the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago and based on the belief of animism. The gods (natural gods, land gods) became the patron saints of the political system composed of the wealthy clans in various places; while the Buddhas were foreign gods, also known as “*Banshin* (蕃神, Outer God).”

3. Japanese mythology is taken from “*Kojiki*,” “*Nihon Shoki*” and Motoori Norinaga’s “*Kojiki*” research

Professor Lan mentioned that Japanese mythology is taken from the *Kojiki* (古事記, “An Account of Ancient Matters”), the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, “The Chronicles of Japan,”) and the ancient reports of “*Fudoki*” (風土記) in various places. It is a mythological system centered on the gods in *Takamagahara* (高天原, “Plain of High Heaven”), also known as “*Kiki Myth* (記紀神話).” Among them, *Kojiki and Nihon Shoki* were compiled to represent the legitimacy of the Emperor’s rule, which means that mythology is part of the story of the emperor. Therefore, the compilation of the book was also influenced by the power of Emperor *Tenmu* and Emperor *Jito* at that time. *Nihon Shoki* is written in Chinese, copied from Chinese classics, and explained by the theory of yin and yang; *Kojiki* uses both *On’yomi* (音読み) and *kunyomi*. Motoori Norinaga believed that *Nihon Shoki* was written in Chinese and the theory of Yin and Yang could not explain ancient Japanese thoughts. Therefore, he believed that *Kojiki* is

more suitable for explaining the *Koukoku* (皇国, Empire of Japan) and will not be polluted by *Karagokoro* (漢心, 漢意 Chinese characters from China, moral principles and political theories in Chinese books, etc.) The concepts of “*Wa* (和)” “*Kan* (漢),” “Japan,” and “Japanese” were further interpreted by the *Kojiki-den* (古事記伝) written by Motoori Norinaga. The inheritance and critique of Motoi Nobunaga’s arguments sparked the *Kokugaku* Movement in Japan in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through the analysis of Japanese mythology and the criticism of Confucianism and China, *Kokugaku* made essential descriptions and arguments on the question of what is “Japan” and “Japanese.”

4. The close relationship between Japanese myths and the Emperor

Professor Lan continued to point out that Japanese mythology described the emperor’s ancestors, mainly for the purpose to legitimize the Emperor’s rule. Japanese mythology is divided into three major systems: *Takamagahara* (高天原) mythology, *Himuka* (日向) mythology, and *Izumo* (出雲) mythology. The gods appearing in the first two are also called *Amanokami* (天津神), and the main god of the *Izumo* mythology is called *Kunitsu Kami* (國津神). The main plot of Japanese mythology is the birth of *Amanokami* and the process of conquering *Kunitsu Kami*. It symbolized the process of conquering other local governments by the Yamato kingdom related to the royal family today. Professor Lan gave a detailed lecture on the story of the Emperor’s ancestors in mythology and the characteristics of Japanese mythology.

(1). The ancestors of the Emperor: *Izanami* (伊邪那美) and *Izanaki* (伊邪那岐), among the seven generations of primordial deities, gave birth to the eight major islands of Japan. *Izanami* was burned to death when giving birth to the child *Kagu-tsuchi* (incarnation of fire). *Izanaki* missed his wife and undertook a journey to *Yomi* (“the shadowy land of the dead”) but found his wife’s appearance became ugly and ran away. While he bathed, in order to wash away the dirt of *Yomi*, *Izanagi* gave birth to the three gods of *Amaterasu-Ōmikami* (天照大神), *Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto* (月讀命), and *Susano* (須佐之男命). Then *Amaterasu-Ōmikami* and *Susano* used swords and jade to give birth to three female kami and five male kami during bartering in *Takamagahara*. Among the five male kami, *Amenooshihomimi* (天之忍穗耳命) is the direct ancestor of the Emperor. Professor Lan pointed out that in this way, the birth of Japan is directly connected with the Emperor's regime.

(2). The characteristics of Japanese mythology: including (1) the world view of

polytheism. (2) Highly politicized myth: *Kiki* myth is made for certain kind of political purpose. The story of the arrival of *Amaterasu*'s grandson may be related to the history that Emperor Jito abdicated and handed over the crown to his grandson, Emperor Tenmu. (3) Masao Maruyama, a leading scholars of political theory history, argued that Japanese mythology is a myth system combining *Naru* (なる, means "become") and *Umu* (うむ, means "give birth to"), not *Tsukuru* (つくる, means "produce"). (4) The creation myth directly connects the history of the nation.

At the end of the speech, Professor Lan mentioned the Meiji government's concept of the unity of church and state was a state system that valued imperial household religious rites and Shinto shrine as official religious rites, but recognized various religious beliefs in the private sphere. Imperial household religious rites have become the basis of the unity of church and state and the training of respecting the imperial household was consolidated through schools. Nonetheless, many religious rites were invented in modern times, not original. Professor Lan pointed out that the history we know now has been subjectively interpreted and there are ideologies behind history education. And what is true and what is false? Both historical code and historical memory can be manipulated. Thus, he encouraged students to cultivate the ability of self-thinking and independent judgment during academic training.

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(Written by Hsin-I Huang, Assistant Professor of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature)

(English Version Translated by Wenting (Florence) Yang, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute for National Defense and Security Research)