



Michael Como, *Weaving and Binding: Immigrant Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan*

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IN *Weaving and Binding*, as in his first book, *Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2008), Michael Como mines a vast array of early texts to demonstrate the enormous impact of immigrant groups on the development of rituals and beliefs that became widespread in Japan

during the Heian, Nara, and even earlier eras. While in *Shōtoku* Como focused on the influence of immigrant lineages on the Japanese Buddhist tradition, in *Weaving and Binding* he examines their impact on both early Japanese Buddhism and, especially, the non-Buddhist ideas and practices that have so often been labeled “native.” Immigrant lineages, Como suggests, brought, spread, and adapted continental rituals and beliefs that fundamentally shaped many, if not most, important aspects of religiosity in pre-Nara and Nara Japan.

Moreover, Como argues, those continental influences derived not so much from elite Confucian or Taoist influences, but rather from widespread elements of more popular Chinese (and Korean) religiosity, including animal sacrifice, spirit pacification, the search for immortality, and rites to deities of the household or of sericulture—all of which, Como emphasizes, were also linked to the Chinese festival calendar. Como suggests that it is only by seeing the connections between the “red earth” of Yoshino and the Chinese search for cinnabar and immortality or, even more provocatively, between Amaterasu in the Heavenly Grotto, an ancestral weaving maiden or a shamaness in a ritual enclosure, and a silkworm entering and then emerging from a cocoon, can we understand both the development and the contemporary resonances of the narratives in the *Nihon Shoki*, *Kojiki*, gazetteers, story collections, and poetry compilations of ancient Japan.

Como does not contend that such texts show how people actually thought and acted in the fifth or sixth centuries. Rather, following the rigorous textual analysis that has come to characterize the best scholarship in this field, he focuses on what the details of each text can tell us about the time and place in which the text was composed and the people who contributed to or edited it. He then combines archaeological and historical scholarship with a genealogical analysis of ideas to trace the plausible origins and routes of transmission of those details. Paying close attention to names that repeatedly appear in the texts, Como highlights the connections of influential lineages to the Korean peninsula—either as immigrants themselves (such as the Hata), or as lineages with whom immigrants affiliated or claimed kinship (for example, the Kusakabe or Mononobe). He combines this sensitivity to names and lineages with a focus on the physical locations of shrines, deities, and events as narrated in the texts, suggesting a path of cultic and technological influence extending from the Korean peninsula to ports (such as Tsunoga, facing the Korean kingdoms of Koguryo and Silla), coastal provinces (such as Tamba or Naniwa), and strongholds of immigrant lineages in Yoshino and Yamato.

Como begins by demonstrating the influential status of immigrants from the Korean peninsula and their descendants in the 700s—a status accrued in large part, Como suggests, due to their purported expertise in propitiating deities in Kyushu who were reputed to have killed several Yamato rulers. He then cites evidence—from the *Nihon ryōiki* in particular—that by the move of the capital to Heian in the early 800s, cultic practices around the country had become permeated by Chinese ritual practices associated with Korean immigrants: meat sacrifices to cowherd dei-

ties, offerings to sacred maidens associated with weaving, animal sacrifices by road-sides, and the use of substitutions or scapegoats.

Next, Como moves back in time to argue that, by the beginning of the Nara period, kinship groups who interacted with Korea (such as the Ōtomo, Kusakabe, and Hata) had incorporated into their own ancestral legends Chinese ideas of female immortals associated with weaving cults and sericulture, the search for immortality, and the Chinese festival calendar. Using those tropes to interpret sites such as Yoshino as particularly associated with immortality, he argues, kinship groups with Korean connections incorporated both Yoshino and their own deities into the foundational legends and cults—first of the royal house and then, during the ensuing years, of Japanese Buddhism.

In “The Queen Mother of the West and the Ghosts of the Buddhist Tradition,” Como moves back even farther, suggesting that by the late sixth century, the continental cultic complex of the Chinese ritual calendar, rites of spirit pacification, and the cult of the Queen Mother of the West were so widespread in the Japanese islands that they were simply assumed: they seemed “native.” These ideas permeated the rituals and cults of the anti-Buddhist Mononobe, the pro-Buddhist Soga, and the many kinship groups (such as Kusakabe) originally tied to the Mononobe who shifted to ally with the pro-Buddhist Soga after the demise of their sponsors. Thus, Como asserts, continental practices associated most vividly with the opponents of Buddhism shaped the development of Japanese Buddhism and its founding legends.

Having established the influence of continental motifs on the writing of imperial and Buddhist narratives, Como devotes the remainder of the book to reiterating the previous argument through a more focused narrative of the influence of sericulture cults on, first, the conceptualization of ancestral lineages; second, not just court but also popular practice; and finally, the development of the cult of Amaterasu. During the fifth and sixth centuries, especially under King Wakateru (Yūryaku), sericulture and weaving developed quickly. According to Como, the new, lineally-organized service groups (*be*) who rose to prominence based on mastery of such continental technologies appropriated continental motifs to develop their own legends of sacred descent based on ancestral weaving maidens’ impregnation by dangerous deities. In doing so, the service groups asserted their claims to a special ability to pacify deities who threatened the Yamato court. Beginning probably around the time of the Sui delegation to Suiko’s court in 608, Como argues, popular Chinese legends and rituals related to sericulture, immortals, and silkworms (especially their three-fold transformation from caterpillar to cocoon to moth) spread widely among not just the court but also the common populace. By this time, then, the ancestral legends of the lineages of the Mononobe, Wani, and Owari Muraji (who were all connected to Korean immigrants and claimed descent from the deity Ama no Hoakari) included motifs related to purification, spirit-quieting, spirit-shaking, sun deities, violence against women, and resurrection. These motifs were not only related to Korean and

Chinese sources, but also shaped the development of the legend of the death, resurrection, and transformation of the silkworm-goddess Amaterasu in the Heavenly Grotto.

For the specialist, *Weaving and Binding* inspires wonderful moments of insights, but requires great care in reading. At times, quoted texts do not fully support the conclusions that follow, even though more convincing evidence might then appear in a later chapter or the appendix. The presentation proves even more daunting for the general reader or undergraduate. Although Como repeatedly frames his analysis in terms of “horizons of reception,” for instance, he neither explains the concept nor cites the various theorists of reception who developed it. Despite the centrality of geographical locations and genealogical politics in his argument, Como includes neither maps nor genealogical charts in the book, let alone a timeline of the historical developments—whether technological, cultic, or narrative; in Japan, China, or Korea—that he argues are so crucial to understanding the development of various legends. Instead, he provides a helpful note on each of his broad range of sources, which highlights the broader East Asian context of the narratives analyzed in the book, and a glossary of names and terms that, while useful for looking up detailed connections in Como’s argument about each figure, lacks either approximate dates for important individuals (such as Prince Shōtoku or Suiko) or a clear logic for the inclusion or exclusion of particular entries. One can only suspect that the additional clarity necessitated by the creation of such maps, timelines, or genealogical charts might not only have prompted Como to fill in some of the logical gaps in his arguments, but also have helped him present his groundbreaking arguments in a more straightforward manner, more accessible to nonspecialists.

Whatever the details, though, Como convincingly argues for a broad awareness among residents of the Japanese islands before the Nara period of continental ideas about women, immortality, silkworms, and spirit pacification, and the formative influence of immigrant kinship groups and their ancestral cults on the founding legends of Japanese Buddhism and the royal house. In doing so, he not only entertains us with fascinating details and connections, but also irrevocably places early Japanese cults and legends in a broader, East Asian context. From now on, scholarship of the ancient texts—even when narrowly focused on early Japanese Buddhism or the royal cult—must likewise look beyond the “native”-“foreign” divide to incorporate our knowledge of the demographic complexity of ancient Japan.

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