



Takashi Miura, *Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan*

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IN *Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan*, Takashi Miura examines a new type of divinity that emerged in Japan in the late eighteenth century. The term *yonaoshi* (world renewing) has a long history, and Miura is careful to distinguish between its usage in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods as well as how scholars have employed it. His study encourages a nuanced and

comprehensive understanding of the term. Miura examines *yonaoshi* gods through specific case studies that often occurred outside the authority of religious professionals, so the extant historical sources are scattered. Hence the book draws upon a wide range of sources, including government records, popular media materials, personal letters, diaries, memoirs, and local histories to examine phenomena that have not typically been studied in-depth because the cases existed on the margins. The strength of Miura's study lies in his meticulous investigation of the various case studies and how he slowly builds detailed evidence into a compelling argument.

Yonaoshi gods have previously been linked by scholars to millenarianism and subversive social movements. Miura, in contrast, demonstrates the complexity and variations of *yonaoshi* gods by situating them within the greater religious trends of the Tokugawa period. The *yonaoshi* gods themselves range from deceased individuals, living people, and even catfish. The human *yonaoshi* gods were sometimes subversive figures, but, as Miura demonstrates, some were also Tokugawa bureaucrats who upheld state interests along with those of the local people. The case studies of Egawa Hidetatsu and Suzuki Chikara in chapter 3 are key to understanding the complexity of *yonaoshi* gods and are fundamental to supporting Miura's thesis. The two Tokugawa bureaucrats were renowned for their policies that economically benefited the local populace in their respective jurisdictions, but both did so in ways that were compatible with their positions in the government. Hidetatsu and Chikara were not subversive figures, but instead helped to support and promote the government. Miura argues that, rather than inspiring rebellions, the thread that ties *yonaoshi* gods together is that they all, in some way, relieved economic distress in their community and that this could occur in ways that were aligned with state interests, in ways that were opposed to state interests, and anywhere in-between.

An example of the compelling evidence Miura gathers from outside conventional temple- and shrine-based research is his inclusion of the robust publishing industry built around catfish prints. This investigation highlights how the *yonaoshi* gods operated beyond the redistribution of wealth to include a reinvigorated circulation of money. The rich were sometimes rebuked, not so much for being rich but for hoarding money and not allowing it to circulate throughout society. The earthquakes brought about by the *namazu*, a mythical giant catfish understood to lie below the surface of the Japanese archipelago, put pressure on the upper classes to spend money on both repair work and charity so that money once again flowed through society. In fact, one of the themes evident in the catfish prints includes low-wage laborers patronizing temporary brothels with their newfound wealth from the post-earthquake construction boom. After an earthquake destroyed the Yoshiwara pleasure district in Edo (contemporary Tokyo), temporary brothels were set up and regulations that typically banned lower-class

laborers were overlooked. This added a sexually-charged element to the prints and also allowed for the laborers to be celebrated as valued post-disaster contributors. Unlike wealthy elites who hoarded money, the laborers would spend their new wealth in brothels, thereby allowing it to flow throughout society.

Chapter 5 on *ee ja nai ka* is the outlier in terms of *yonaoshi* gods since the talismans and dancing songs incorporated a broad pantheon rather than particular deities. Here, Miura turns our focus again to the economic aspect by arguing for the importance of small-scale redistribution of wealth that occurred wherever the talismans were discovered. The household where the discovery was made was taken to be responsible for providing others with food, drinks, and possibly even money. Despite the refusal to work and demands for food from strangers, there were no discussions of overthrowing the Tokugawa regime. In what may be the most provocative contribution of the book, Miura rejects the long-standing supposition that *ee ja nai ka* cases were instances of anti-Tokugawa civic unrest. Like other *yonaoshi* examples, he situates them within the context of efforts to seek economic redress.

Throughout the book, Miura adapts Norman Cohn's definition of millenarianism, emphasizing in particular the capacity of divine agents to offer terrestrial salvation, intervene in this-worldly affairs, and serve as representatives of anti-authoritarianism (COHN 2000). According to this definition, the only full-fledged millenarian uprising is covered in the seventh and final chapter of the book on the new religion Ōmoto. While this structural choice could have resulted in a teleological understanding of *yonaoshi* that saw a final flowering of millenarianism at the end of his study, Miura begins his conclusion with the decidedly non-millenarian use of *yonaoshi* in the 2014 governorship election in Kyoto. Even in this twenty-first century usage, *yonaoshi* was still tied to economic recovery. This contemporary instance demonstrates continuity with the ways that the Tokugawa bureaucrats became deified as living *yonaoshi* gods.

Building on Miura's study, one could take a step back to consider how *yonaoshi* gods in Japan compare to deities and uprisings in other locales. Miura briefly mentions contemporary uprisings in China but does not go into detail; are the *yonaoshi* instances in Japan *sui generis*, or do they derive (at least in part) from continental sources? Additionally, how do the case studies in Japan help us to understand millenarianism, and do they add to our understanding of Norman Cohn's definition? As a Sinologist working on religious uprisings in medieval China, I am particularly interested in how Miura examines the variations of *yonaoshi* gods. Some of the details that struck me were the fleeting nature of the worship—the *yonaoshi* gods were sometimes only temporarily worshiped for brief periods, and only in specific locales—and how numerous uprisings did not demand a change in governance but instead sought immediate economic relief. Additionally, Miura ends his monograph by stating that a study on *yonaoshi*

discourse instead of gods may lead to different results, which could be another avenue for fruitful research. Overall, Miura's book provides a detailed study of *yonaoshi* gods that breaks with previous scholarship and forges a new path for drawing upon a variety of sources to create a more comprehensive understanding of *yonaoshi* gods as well as Tokugawa- and Meiji-period religion.

REFERENCE

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