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The Cultural Meaning of *Setsuwa*

Ono no Takamura's Journey to Hell and Back

This article explores the cultural meaning of the historical transmission of *setsuwa* tales in Japan through an examination of the journey to the underworld of ninth-century courtier Ono no Takamura. First recorded in *setsuwa* anthologies compiled in the twelfth century, this tale would eventually move beyond the framework of tale anthologies during the medieval era and come to be interwoven within local oral transmissions in Kyoto, where the story continues to be told today. In this article, I consider numerous textual variants of the story of Takamura's visit to the underworld. By highlighting the relationship between the historical transformation of the story's content and the local religious cultures within which variants of the story were passed down, I investigate the larger cultural role played by this tale in shaping the imagination of life and death and consider what Takamura can teach us about the boundary-crossing dynamics of *setsuwa* and transmitted oral literature.

keywords: *setsuwa*—underworld (hell)—Jizō Bosatsu—ancestor worship—Kyoto

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The defining characteristic of *setsuwa* 説話 (narrative tales) as a form of Japanese literature is that they have been passed down as oral traditions. Preserved in a wide variety of documents, many *setsuwa* have been transmitted to the present day. Because they are passed down through multiple retellings, *setsuwa* are closely tied to cultural features of the time and society that produced and transmitted them. In this article, I examine the role that *setsuwa* have played within Japanese culture, focusing in particular on the cultural meaning of one tale, the journey of Ono no Takamura 小野 篁 (802–852) to the underworld (*meikai* 冥界), that transcended the medieval to the modern periods by being continually recast in new forms.

The tale centers upon Ono no Takamura, a courtier said to possess the strange ability to shuttle between this world and the world of the dead. From the medieval period onward, Takamura's story was recorded in a wide variety of texts. Moreover, the story came to be closely connected with Kyoto—the setting of the tale—and in particular one location on the edge of the city that was a site for the performance of memorial rites for the dead, a physical space thought to be the very "boundary between life and death."

Through an examination of the tale of Ono no Takamura's journey to the underworld, I seek to illuminate one salient facet of the enduring cultural role that *setsuwa* have played in Japanese society over multiple generations. First, I survey the process through which the tale came into being and introduce key features of the narrative. I then explain the connections between this tale and two related phenomena: the cult of Jizō Bosatsu 地蔵菩薩 and memorial rites for the dead in Kyoto. Finally, I close with some observations on the question of why this particular tale was continually passed down through the centuries.

Ono no Takamura's Journey to the Underworld: Summary and Characteristics of the Tale

A courtier of the ninth century, Ono no Takamura was well known as a scholar and poet. Takamura was appointed as deputy envoy to a diplomatic mission to Tang China (*kentōshi* 遣唐使), but in 838, when the boat was all set to sail, he feigned illness and did not board. This was Takamura's way to protest the despotism of imperial ambassador Fujiwara no Tsunetsugu 藤原常嗣 (796–840). Takamura would thereafter satirize the post of envoys to the Tang in his poem "Songs on the Way to the West" (Saidōyō 西道謡). As a consequence, he found himself exiled to Oki no kuni 隠岐国 at the mandate of Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (786–842).

However, a pardon eventually allowed him to return to the capital in 840 and resume his post the following year. He then served as associate counselor (*sangi* 参議) in 847, and was promoted to third rank (*junsanmi* 従三位) in the twelfth month of 852. He died on the twenty-second day of the same month, at the age of fifty-one (KT 3: 43–44). As a member of the Ono 小野 clan who ranked as associate counselor, Takamura was often referred to as Yashōkō 野相公 and Yasaishō 野宰相, *shōkō* and *saishō* being Tang-style synonyms for associate counselor.

From the twelfth century, these episodes in Ono no Takamura's life as well as the Chinese poetry (*kanshi* 漢詩), *waka*, and prose he left behind became the basis for *setsuwa* and *monogatari* 物語 narratives featuring Takamura as protagonist. One prominent tale, of which several early versions exist, is the story of his journey to the underworld. "On How Yakō (Ono no Takamura) was the Second Underworld Judge in King Yama's Court," a story included in the *Gōdanshō* (SNKBT 32: 87–88), tells how Fujiwara no Takafuji 藤原高藤 (838–900), after dying suddenly and going to hell, catches sight of Takamura serving as an underworld official. Another version is "The Story of When Ono no Takamura Saved the Minister of Nishi-Sanjō out of Sympathy" (SNKBT 36: 309–311), which concerns Fujiwara no Yoshimi 藤原良相 (813–867), otherwise known as the "Minister of Nishi-Sanjō," who dies and goes to the underworld. Takamura, here again depicted as an underworld official, intervenes with King Yama (Enmaō 閻魔王) on Yoshimi's behalf and facilitates the latter's return to life. This tale of Takamura reviving the minister (*daijin* 大臣) came to be included in other records (for example, KT 12: 200; *Sangoku denki* 1: 228–230). In these different versions of the tale, the basic structure of the narrative remains stable while variant names are used for the minister who Takamura assists (for example, Fujiwara no Tadamori 藤原三守 [785–840], Kiyohara no Natsuno 清原夏野 [782–837], and others).

Behind the emergence of tales in which Takamura figures as an underworld official, we can discern the influence of Chinese Tang- and Song-period stories pertaining to hell as a bureaucratic institution (*meifu* 冥府). In particular, it has been pointed out that the portrayal of Takamura as an underworld official was influenced by the "Biography of Liu Zhigan of Hedong" (*Hedong Liu Zhigan zhuan* 河東柳智感伝), which was included in the Tang-period Buddhist tale anthology *Mingbaoji* (T 2082, 51.801–802), as well as the "Record of Tang Taizong Entering the Underworld," a Dunhuang "transformation text" (*bianwen* 変文) about Cui Ziyu 崔子玉 (*Tang Taizong ruming ji*, 209–215; see also KAWAGUCHI 1967; ISHIHARA 1990; LI 2009). In these Chinese tales of the underworld, an outstanding servant of the state is posthumously nominated to an official position in the underworld bureau, or in some cases they are already employed in the underworld bureau in their still-living bodies. Such tales serve as one source of inspiration for the story of Ono no Takamura, who likewise juggles two official posts—one at court among the living and the other in hell—while still alive.

In the world of tales, Ono no Takamura is known as a figure of outstanding scholastic capabilities. In the *Uji shūi monogatari* tale, "The Broad Learning of Ono no Takamura," Takamura is ordered by Emperor Saga to read a phrase that had been illicitly scrawled on a plaque at the Imperial Palace. Takamura takes the phrase—"neither good nor evil" (*muakuzen* 無悪善)—and reads it *saga nakute yokaran*, which can mean "it is good there is no evil" or, more contentiously, "things would be good without Saga" (SNKBT 42: 102–103). Offended by this pointed gloss, Emperor Saga thus suspects Takamura to be the very criminal responsible for the graffiti in the first place. We are told Takamura then proves his innocence by reading another phrase comprised of a sequence of twelve instances of the character 子, which can be read *ne*, *ko*, or *shi*: "The child of a cat is a kitten, the child of a lion is a cub" (*neko no ko, koneko, shishi no ko, kojishi* ねこの子こねこ、ししの子こじし). This story reveals tensions between the erudition of Takamura and that of Emperor Saga. It also closely reflects images of Takamura shaped by notable events of his career, namely the fact that he was censured and exiled by Emperor Saga for his criticism of diplomatic missions to Tang China.

There is no shortage of examples of other similar tales in which literati of learning comparable to Ono no Takamura showcase their unique capabilities. For example, Miyako no Yoshika 都 良香 (834–879), known for exchanging poems with the demon of Rashōmon gate (SNKBT 32: 114–115), played a central role in editing the *Nihon Montoku tennō jitsuroku* and became a welcoming envoy for diplomats from the Balhae Kingdom (*shō Bokkai kyakushi* 掌渤海客使). Ki no Haseo 紀長谷雄 (845–912), who faced off with the demon of Suzakumon gate in a bout of *sugoroku* 双六 (*Haseo zōshi*, 2–39), is known as the scholar who compiled the *Engikyaku* 延喜格. Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備 (695–775), who served as a Japanese envoy to the Tang in the Nara 奈良 period (710–794), is said to have overcome various hurdles, including comprehending the *Wenxuan* 文選, mastering the board game *igo* 囲碁, and deciphering the poem known as *Yabatai shi* 野馬台詩, thanks partly to the help of Abe no Nakamaro 安部仲麻呂 (701–770), who died abroad in Tang China and was said to have become a demon himself (SNKBT 32: 63–69). In the *Kakōshi*, compiled sometime in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, there is even a story in which everyone fails to read the *Yabatai shi* brought back by Makibi, whereupon Ono no Takamura, benefiting from the miraculous assistance of the Hase Kannon 長谷観音, is able to decipher it (*Kakōshi*, 105–146; KOMINE 2003).

Among the literati whose exceptional talents are depicted in tale literature, one who like Takamura was very closely linked to the underworld bureau was Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903). Michizane was also critical of diplomatic missions to Tang China and even succeeded at convincing the emperor to terminate them altogether. In the *Kitano Tenjin engi*, Michizane reincarnates as the "Minister of the Council of State of Japan, Deity of Majestic Virtue"

(Nihon Daijō Itokuten 日本太政威徳天) and Saga, the emperor who sent Michizane into exile, is depicted undergoing punishments in hell (*Kitano Tenjin engi*, 142–162). Much research has noted these undeniable parallels between the career of Michizane and stories about it and Ono no Takamura's journey to the underworld (Kawaguchi 1967; Kikuchi 1999; Takagi 2000). In the world of *setsuwa*, literati were imagined as individuals possessing powers surpassing even those wielded by the imperial court, which purported to control the social order itself. In the case of Ono no Takamura, it is thought that his role as an official of the underworld within *setsuwa* was informed by events of his career and his biography, such as his return to court rank and position after coming back to the capital from exile in Oki and his successive appointments as censorate (*danjōdai* 弾正台) in the government (Ishihara 1972; Yamato 1984; Takagi 2000).

The Development of Tales of Ono no Takamura's Underworld Journey connections with the cult of jizō

The tale of Ono no Takamura's trip to the underworld developed in the medieval period within religious cultures distinct from the genealogy of *setsuwa* anthologies. One such context was the cult of Jizō Bosatsu. Japanese imaginations of the underworld are rooted in Chinese beliefs surrounding the ten kings—the ten judges who try deceased persons that end up in hell—and Jizō, who is often imagined bringing salvation to those in hell. In the medieval theological framework known as "original ground, manifest traces" (*honji suijaku* 本地垂迹), the bodhisattva Jizō is sometimes understood as the "original ground buddha" (*honjibutsu* 本地仏) of King Yama, the most important of the ten kings. Beliefs about salvation from the hells through the intervention of this bodhisattva, moreover, circulated widely in the form of miracle tales (*reigenki* 霊験記), including illustrated versions (*reigenki e* 霊験記絵), from the medieval period on.

Stories of Takamura's journey to the underworld and the cult of Jizō both take the world after death as their setting, but originally there were no direct connections drawn between them. The work that forged the initial link between them was *Yata Jizō engi* from the early Kamakura period. In the first half of this story, a Yatadera 矢田寺 monk by the name of Manmai 満米 (or Mankei 満慶) travels to hell at Takamura's recommendation in order to serve as the precept master to bestow the bodhisattva precepts (*bosatsu kai* 菩薩戒) on King Yama. The story goes that upon bestowing the precepts, Manmai takes a tour of hell, whereupon he encounters the bodhisattva Jizō helping to bring salvation to the deceased. As a result, when Manmai returns to this world of the living, he carves a wooden statue in the likeness of Jizō and enshrines it as the primary object of veneration (*honzon* 本尊) at Yatadera (*Yata Jizō engi*, 305–306). The *Yata Jizō engi* is thus one story that speaks to the miraculous powers of Jizō, which saw wide circulation

in the medieval and early modern periods. Takamura, in the guise of an underworld official, figures in the *engi* as the one who crucially provides to Manmai the opportunity of a trip to hell. Therefore, with the circulation of the *Yata Jizō engi*, Takamura's connections with the cult of Jizō were established (Watari 1995).

In the early modern period, Ono no Takamura's imagined links to the underworld became so pronounced that discourses eventually emerged casting him as the "transformation body of King Yama" (*Enma ō no kesshin* 閻魔王の化身) (*Kanden kōhitsu*, 200). In local histories, essays (*zuihitsu* 随筆), and Jizō-centered miracle tales published in the early modern period, we find legends depicting Takamura as the creator of icons associated with hell, such as those of King Yama, the bodhisattva Jizō, and the companion spirits (*kushōjin* 倶生神), the two clerks who keep records of the sins a person commits over their lifetime and report them to King Yama. Among these, especially starting with the *Yamashiro shū Uji gun roku Jizō bosatsu engi* (held in Daizenji 大善寺) published in 1665, origin stories began to appear in which Manmai of the *Yata Jizō engi* is replaced with the character of Takamura (*Yamashiro shū Uji gun roku Jizō bosatsu engi*, 157–162). Eventually, some stories claimed that Takamura is the creator of the miraculous Jizō icon at Yatadera. Through these links with the Jizō cult in oral literature, the tale of Ono no Takamura's underworld journey created possibilities for people to form karmic connections with Jizō Bosatsu by reading or hearing the tale, or by visiting associated temples and their icons.

The Localization of the Tale and Practices of Ancestor Worship

Another trajectory in the evolution of the story of Ono no Takamura's journey to the underworld took place within local oral literature produced in Kyoto. Ono no Takamura's point of entry into hell through which he was able to make his commute was said to be Otagidera 愛宕寺 (Chinnōji 珍皇寺), a temple located not far from the eastern banks of the Kamo River. An early example of this attribution can be found in commentary on poems in the *Wakan rōeishū Eisai chū*, which is thought to be an early thirteenth-century compilation. The text notes that Takamura entered the underworld by riding his palanquin from the area of the "Otagidera stupa." This "Otagitō" 愛宕塔 is speculated to have been either at Otagidera or to be the five-tiered pagoda of Hōkanji 法観寺, a temple situated just northeast of Chinnōji (*Wakan rōeishū Eisai chū*, 253–254). In the entry for Chinnōji (glossed as "Otagidera") in fascicle six of the ten-fascicle *Iroha jiruishō*—also believed to be an early thirteenth-century compilation—records attribute the establishment of Chinnōji to Takamura. The passage further states that because of this connection, the Ullambana (*urabon'e* 盂蘭盆会), a Buddhist memorial rite for ancestors, is performed at that site. Readers are moreover told that, until the disastrous fire that broke out during the Eikyū 永久 era (1113–1118),

among the treasures passed down through the generations within the temple there were several personal belongings of Takamura, including his cap, scepter, and outer robe (*Iroha jiruishō*, 207–208). In other words, not long after the period in which stories featuring Takamura as an underworld officer appeared, ties were already being forged between Otagidera (Chinnōji) and Takamura in connection with the Ullambana. The assembly as performed at Chinnōji appears in historical sources by the eleventh century. For example, the *Konjaku monogatari shū* story entitled "On *Bon*, the Fifteenth Day of the Seventh Month a Woman Offers a Poem" (SNKBT 36: 469) describes how a poor woman makes a pilgrimage to Otagidera (Chinnōji) on the day of the Ullambana, demonstrating the temple was indeed a site for the ceremony.

Chinnōji's association with the Ullambana ceremony relates to the fact that the area of Higashiyama 東山 in which it was located overlapped with the road leading to Toribeno 鳥辺野. From the mid-Heian period on, Toribeno was known as a funerary site. The banks of the Kamo River, which flowed just west of Chinnōji, were also a site where corpses had been abandoned or given open-air burials since the ancient period. The vicinity of Chinnōji was accordingly known as the "crossroads of the six paths" (*rokudō no tsuji* 六道ノ辻); this name combines the idea of a crossroads leading to actual burial grounds together with the Buddhist notion of the six paths, according to which persons endlessly transmigrate through life and death due to karmic causes carried over from previous lifetimes. Drawing attention to these overlapping meanings, Tokuda Kazuo points out that within pilgrimage mandalas (*sankei mandara* 参詣曼荼羅) depicting the Higashiyama area, including the *Kiyomizudera sankei mandara* 清水寺参詣曼荼羅 and *Hōkanji sankei mandara* 法観寺参詣曼荼羅, the two bridges of Gojō and Shijō over the Kamo River mark the division between "this world" (the area west of the Kamo River) and "that world" (the area east of the river leading to the Toribeno burial grounds). He also notes that the depiction of the wooden plaques (*sotoba* 卒塔婆) and stone stupas characteristically found at graves within the illustrated scene of Chinnōji near Gojō Bridge conveys to viewers that this is indeed a space closely linked with death (TOKUDA 1990, 112–118).

Moreover, the *Chinnōji sankei mandara* held at Rokudō Chinnōji 六道珍皇寺, thought to date from the Momoyama period, depicts people gathering at Chinnōji for the Ullambana. Within the grounds of Chinnōji are exhibited puppets related to hell, such as King Yama and the Ten Kings, and scenes related to the Sai riverbed (Sai no kawara 賽の河原). Thus the scroll makes visible the world of religious oral literature that developed at Chinnōji and its environs. One important detail for the present study is that a caption next to a well in the top-right edge of the picture reads, "The well through which Ono no Takamura commutes to the underworld." This demonstrates that by this time Ono no Takamura's underworld journey had become an important element in the religious culture

of the Chinnōji neighborhood. In the subsequent early modern period, Chinnōji would become a flourishing pilgrimage site for the welcoming of ancestral spirits (*shōryō mukae* 精霊迎え; also known as "pilgrimage through the six paths," *rokudō mairi* 六道まいり), a practice conducted immediately before the Ullambana. On the temple grounds, an image of Ono no Takamura is enshrined along with one of King Yama, rendering visible the stories proclaiming that this site was Ono no Takamura's entrance to hell.

Legends about Takamura's underworld journey likely brought certainty that the site for the performance of ancestral worship did in fact constitute a pathway to hell, confirming too that it was a space where ancestors could return to this world. Still today, the "pilgrimage through the six paths" is performed on an annual basis, and many people within Kyoto gather at Chinnōji to participate. It is evident that the ties between Ono no Takamura and this ritual are still alive today through the persistence of the transmission of these stories.

Based on the Chinnōji story of Ono no Takamura's trip to the underworld, new legends pertaining to Takamura emerged in other locales in Kyoto. Adashino 化野 in Saga 嵯峨 and Rendaino 蓮台野 in Kamigyō 上京 are two sites that, like Toribeno in Higashiyama, served as burial grounds in Kyoto from the medieval period on. In the middle of the early modern period, Saga was said to contain a site known as the "six paths of life" (*shō no rokudō* 生の六道), which people identified as Takamura's exit when he came back from hell. An abridged origin story published by the temple located on this site, Fukushōji 福生, which is primarily an edited version of the *Yata Jizō engi*, describes Ono no Takamura's creation of the "Jizō Bosatsu of the six paths of life" icon. In turn, based on this story, according to the *Sanshū meiseikishi* (56) it was said that the area of Chinnōji was the "six paths of death" (*shi no rokudō* 死の六道). From the mid-Meiji period on, it was widely proclaimed that the welcoming of ancestral spirits ceremony performed at Senbon Enmadō 千本閻魔堂 (Injōji 引接寺), located at the entrance of Rendaino, was linked to the famous Takamura. In the early Meiji period, new state policies instigated a decline of local religious practices such as these memorial rites. The welcoming of the ancestral spirits at Senbon Enmadō thus represents the revival of these older practices, one which drew upon the rich and well-established connections with Takamura (Matsuyama 2012). Such new transmissions about Ono no Takamura were a part of a longer history of stories about Takamura originally coming out of Chinnōji in the east of the city.

Kyoto-based legends of Takamura's underworld journey that emerged around Chinnōji spread widely and connected the Ullambana of the medieval period with the early modern ceremony for welcoming the ancestral spirits. The links between ritual practice and legends came to be solidified in visible forms such as the puppets used to preach about temple treasures and legends, wooden statues of Takamura, and the precise marking of the well by which Takamura com-

muted to his second job in hell. These local transmissions were stories that grew out of the associations established earlier by *setsuwa* tales; ceaselessly made and remade, they went on to traverse multiple historical periods.

Conclusion

From the medieval period on, Ono no Takamura's journey to the underworld, a tale that emerged in the twelfth century, came to be intertwined with the cult of Jizō and memorial rites for the deceased in Kyoto, namely the Ullambana and welcoming of the ancestral spirits. From the early modern to modern periods, novel retellings of the story based on the *setsuwa* and transmissions of earlier periods continued to be produced in multiple locations throughout Kyoto. In my reading, the story of Ono no Takamura was able to transcend both time and place in this way because the links between Takamura and the underworld functioned to convincingly demonstrate for Japanese society the connections between this world of the living and the world after death. These variations of the Takamura tales seen in different historical periods also shed light on the diversity of religious culture for which the Takamura story was a necessary piece. That is, because the problem of life and death will never disappear as an abiding concern within society, Takamura's story continues to be meaningful, even as it has been adapted to changing circumstances by those who have told it.

A historical figure active during the ninth century, Ono no Takamura was known as an erudite scholar, poet, and courtier with enough backbone to make his opinions on state policies publicly known, leading to his being exiled. It was because of Takamura's idiosyncratic personality and career that in the twelfth century a *setsuwa* would cast him as a literati with remarkable learning who displays power exceeding human intelligence and details his incredible journey to the underworld, the tales of which additionally drew inspiration from Chinese stories of the afterlife. Moreover, Takamura's story would transcend the framework of *setsuwa* anthologies of the medieval period. I see Takamura's story as one example of the ways in which *setsuwa* played a significant role within society to explain the origins of various cultural phenomena. Takamura's journey to the underworld reveals an important dimension of religious culture in Japan pertaining specifically to the imagination of life and death. Takamura's tale is a story that in many tangible ways has served to bridge this life and the next. As such, it demonstrates the boundary-crossing power exhibited by *setsuwa* and other transmitted tales within religious culture in Japanese history.

[Translated by Andrew Macomber]

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