

Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura (trsl. & ed.),  
*Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition:*  
*The Nihon ryōiki of the Monk Kyōkai.*

Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997 (reprint; first published in 1973 by  
 Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.)

When people think of Buddhism in Heian Japan, they usually think of the establishment of the great monastic orders on Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kōya by Saichō and Kūkai respectively, the rise of Pure Land Buddhism as propagated by learned monks such as Genshin, the dominance of court nobles among high ranking priests, doctrinal subtleties about the attainment of Buddhahood in this life, metaphysical speculations about Buddha nature, the assimilation of indigenous gods in the Buddhist pantheon, and so on. But there was yet another Buddhism in this period: the Buddhism of the laity and the common folk, the Buddhism of low-ranking or self-ordained non-educated priests and nuns; a Buddhism which did not care much about the implications of the *trikāya* doctrine, or whether the “Three-thousand Worlds” were present in one thought-moment. On the popular level, Buddhism was mainly seen as a superior means to gain superhuman powers, to ban demons and cure illnesses, and to protect against any kind of misfortune. Popular beliefs and practices have long been neglected by Buddhologists who deemed them vulgar forms of Buddhism or simply superstition unworthy of attention. As a result of such a scholarly attitude, studies in popular Buddhism have been delegated for the most part to folklorists or ethnologists. In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars apparently have realized that there is more to religion as a historical phenomenon than lofty doctrines and clerical institutions. It has become evident that a thorough understanding of the dynamics of religious history in Japan requires detailed knowledge of Buddhism as it was adopted, interpreted, and practiced by laypeople and non-monastic practitioners.

It is a widely agreed upon fact that the major source of information about popular religiosity is a literary genre called *setsuwa* 説話 (“edifying narratives”). The term *setsuwashū* (“compilation of edifying narratives”) is used to denote a considerable variety of ancient and medieval collections of relatively short tales or narratives which are imbued with Buddhist ethics and aim at the edification of their audience.

While Japanese Buddhologists have come to recognize the significance of *setsuwa* for the study of Buddhism, the field of *setsuwa* studies in the West has been mainly occupied by historians of literature rather than religion. Thus, every contribution to making Western scholars of religion

more familiar with *setsuwa* texts must be welcomed. A major contribution in this respect has undoubtedly been made by Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura.

Already in 1973 she had translated and analyzed the oldest extant *setsuwa* collection, a work called *Nihon koku genpō zen'aku ryōi ki* 日本國現報善惡靈異記 (“Records of Numinous Retributions of Good and Evil in the Country of Japan”; hereafter *Ryōiki*), written by the monk Kyōkai 景戒 probably during the Kōnin era, i.e. between 810 and 824. In 1997 this book was reprinted by the British publisher Curzon Press. Although it is merely a reprint, I think this excellent and important book deserves a new review.

Notwithstanding the fact that some scholars of literature have maintained that the *Ryōiki* was of minor significance as far as literary quality is concerned, its significance as source material for subsequent *setsuwa* compilers as well as historians cannot be denied. *Ryōiki* contains 116 chronologically arranged stories, many of which were later absorbed by the editor of the celebrated *Konjaku monogatari shū*, generally regarded as the epitome of *setsuwa* literature. Kyōkai's pioneering work was obviously widely circulated and well-known in Japan for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, no complete manuscript of the three-volume original has survived. However, several fragmentary versions are extant, the oldest of which (dated to 904) was discovered in 1922. Only the first volume of this so-called “Kōfuku-ji manuscript” has been preserved.

Several critical editions of the *Ryōiki* have been published since the nineteenth century. The first to translate the text into a western language was Hermann BOHNER. His annotated German translation was published in 1934 by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens under the title “Legenden aus der Frühzeit des japanischen Buddhismus (*Nippon-koku-gembō-zenaku-ryō-i-ki*).” Since Bohner's work failed to find a broad audience for several reasons which had nothing to do with its quality, a new English translation based on the critical edition of ENDŌ Yoshimoto and KASUGA Kazuo (published in 1967 in the *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* series) was very much needed. In fact, Nakamura's book is much more than merely a lavishly annotated translation.

Chapter 1 (“Background”) is dedicated to Kyōkai, his life and motives, the date of compilation of the *Ryōiki*, the religious situation of pre-Heian Japan, the *Ryōiki*'s literary predecessors in China, and its successors in Japan. Nakamura demonstrates her familiarity with both Western and Japanese scholarship beyond the scope of her immediate subject matter. This becomes evident when we look at the impressive bibliography, which contains not only Japanese and English titles but also works in French and German. In short, despite the fact that it was written twenty-five years ago,

the first chapter is a highly informative introduction to aspects of ancient Japanese Buddhism and is written from a perspective which differs remarkably from many standard primers. Nakamura exhibits a refreshing down-to-earth approach which does not confuse religion with philosophy or pure metaphysics. Rather, she evokes the image of a historically constructed phenomenon with all of its socio-political implications. The author provides valuable information about the introduction of Buddhism in Japan, why it was adopted by the elite, how it was organized and controlled by the government, etc. The vast number of minute references to both primary sources and secondary literature make the first chapter a good starting point for further research by any reader. Notwithstanding the fact that chapter one deserves much appreciation, a critical remark must be made about Nakamura's evaluation of the *Ryōiki* in terms of genre theory. In my opinion, her assertion that "[t]he *Nihon ryōiki* has the quality of a chronicle," and although not concerned with factual history, describes "history seen from a Buddhist viewpoint," is misleading at best. The pure fact that the narratives are arranged chronologically does not qualify the collection as historiography of any kind, and I strongly doubt that the "new genre of narrative history," of which the *Ryōiki* was the precursor, "eventually in the tenth century replaced the court chronicles that had been modeled on the Chinese pattern" (38). The author here ignores the fact that tale collections like the *Ryōiki* formed a well established genre in Chinese literature (in the preface to the first scroll, Kyōkai himself refers to two such texts from China, namely *Mingbao ji* 冥報記 and *Jingang yanji* 般若驗記) which existed alongside various kinds of historiographic and hagiographic literature. Likewise, in Heian Japan, *setsuwa* collections were extremely popular, but they were neither responsible for the decline of court chronicles, nor did they replace other kinds of chronicles or historiographic genres in general. The *Ryōiki* is simply a collection of edifying stories exploring the working of karmic retribution, written in order "to lead [people] to good, and show them how to cleanse their feet of evil" so that "all be reborn in the western land of bliss" (preface to the third scroll; p. 222). Kyōkai never intended to write a history of Japan or of Buddhism in Japan.

Unfortunately, the refreshing scholarly approach of chapter one is not entirely maintained in the second chapter, entitled "World View Reflected." Although the author gives interesting information about the concept of sin, defilement and related rites, cosmological developments in pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist Japan, etc., and always verifies her statements by references to the *Ryōiki* itself, chapter two is much more speculative and vague. This is probably due to two factors: the author's *Erkenntnisinteresse*,

and her rooting in the scholarly tradition of the “Chicago School.” In her preface, Nakamura states that her “interest lies in this common human experience [i.e. miracles, the notion of sainthood, etc.] , understood within its different historical and cultural settings” (p. V). To be sure, there is nothing wrong with this in principle. Such an approach, however, is liable to be highly dependent on certain, often questionable, theoretical premises. Accordingly, most assertions made on this basis are only tenable as long as the underlying theoretical model can be upheld. Evidently, her theoretical and methodological background lies for the most part in the Department of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, where Nakamura “spent two stimulating years, 1960-1962, under the guidance of Professors Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa” (p. IX). I would, for instance, hesitate to define Amaterasu Ōmikami as “a female shaman” (p. 69), and I am not entirely convinced of her thesis that Buddhist rites, such as repentance rites, should be interpreted as “rites of cosmic renewal” (45-48). The examples she provides from the *Ryōiki* appear to be pressed forcibly into her interpretive framework. Furthermore, I cannot subscribe to the author’s interpretation of the significance of stories about a protagonist’s travel to the nether-world while asleep or seemingly dead. I cannot see why “[t]he crossing may symbolize a rite of passage from one world to the other” (53). Rather, I would suggest that a rite of passage may symbolize the widespread human experience of travel to another world. Likewise, I find it problematic, at least terminologically, to claim that the ascetics’ aim was “a better understanding of the mystery of the universe” (51) and that “[v]arious experiences through which one discovered the mystery of the world were symbolically expressed as visits to the other world” (53). Also, the popular cult of sacred mountains in Japan cannot sufficiently be explained by an alleged desire of people to claim a mountain in their own land “as the center of the cosmos, or the point where the sacred jutted into the world of men” (54-55).

While in the first chapter Nakamura’s neglect of Buddhist doctrine was advantageous, in chapter two a more thorough treatment of eschatological concepts would have been desirable at some points. For example, while Nakamura correctly states that the *Ryōiki* is predominantly “this-world centered” (60), she overstates the contrast between the focus of the *Ryōiki* on this world and “otherworldliness” of later movements, while at the same time neglecting the contrast between a popular edifying and an elitist doctrinal discourse. Although some protagonists are said to be reborn in a Buddha land, the text clearly focuses on the kind of karmic retribution which manifests itself in the present life. At several points, Kyōkai reminds his

readers “that a penalty will be imposed, not in the distant future, but in this life” (I.23: 136), and “that retribution is close at hand in the present life” (I.29: 143). However, this by no means implies that according “to the popular understanding” in Kyōkai’s times, “Buddhahood was attainable in this life of this world” and that this understanding “stands in sharp contrast to that of the later period when men longed for rebirth in the pure land” (60). In fact, theories such as Kūkai’s “attainment of Buddhahood in this body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛) belonged to the realm of doctrinal rhetoric and did not exert much influence on popular Buddhism in the early Heian period. People’s expectations were much simpler: good fortune in this life and a propitious rebirth in the next, preferably in some heaven or Buddha land. Enlightenment or attainment of Buddhahood are terms hardly ever used in the *Ryōiki*.

The *Ryōiki* is written in a somewhat hybrid, “perverted Chinese” (*hentai kanbun* 變態漢文; Endō and Kasuga 1967: 21) or “pseudochinesisch” (Bohner 1934: 19). Translating a text from *kanbun* is a delicate task indeed and often requires good portions of imagination, interpretive skills, and intimacy with the broader historical and literary context of the document. Thus, in many cases there is no right or wrong, and I will abstain from discussing particular points of disagreement here and confine myself to general considerations. Generally speaking, Nakamura has found a satisfying compromise between readability and faithfulness to the original text, although, as a general rule, I would prefer the usage of brackets to mark insertions by the translator, at least in cases in which the insertion is disputable. With a few exceptions, Nakamura uses the same English translations of technical terms, official titles, etc., throughout the text. In addition, she provides a list of “Translated Ranks and Titles” in Appendix C. The necessity of terminological clarity and consistency has too often been neglected by other translators (e.g. DYKSTRA 1983). Since we are far from having well-established and widely accepted translations for cleric ranks and honorific titles used in Japanese Buddhism, it would have been helpful if Nakamura had briefly commented upon her choice and referred to varying translations in other works. The Chinese characters of personal names, place names, and generic terms are mostly given. Unlike some other translators, Nakamura does not simply adopt the annotations of the editors of the Japanese text but, recognizing the fact that Western readers may be in need of additional information, adds her own footnotes and references. I wonder, however, why she did not add dates according to the Western calendar. This omission is only partly counterbalanced by the convenient chronology provided in Appendix A.

While the translator employs standard transcriptions for Chinese (Wade-Giles), Japanese (modified Hepburn), and Sanskrit, in a few cases I was unable to identify any system of transcription (e. g., “Lochana” for Vairocana/Birushana 毘盧遮那 [p. 15, 24], “Saka” for *śākya/shaku* 釋 [p. 124, 131], etc.).

The Appendices D (“Buddhist Scriptures Quoted or Referred to in the *Nihon ryōiki*”) and E (“Chronological List of Major Japanese Works of Legendary Literature during the Heian-Kamakura Periods”) are helpful. Had the author given additional information about major modern editions of the texts mentioned in both appendices, they would have been even more praiseworthy. Nakamura also provides an index which is, unfortunately, not very helpful. I simply cannot understand why she chose to index only the introduction and not the translation.

In spite of these minor points of criticism, *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* is an excellent scholarly work which deserves the attention of scholars from various fields. With this book Nakamura has set a standard which has only occasionally been reached by subsequent translators of *setsuwa* texts (e.g. KAMENS 1988). We can only be dismayed the fact that she did not continue to produce further translations of that kind. Finally, we should thank Curzon Press for undertaking the reprinting of such an excellent book. Despite the high price of the reprint, I would not hesitate to recommend its purchase. It is worth every single dollar, yen, pound or whatever currency it takes.

#### References:

- BOHNER, Hermann. 1934. *Legenden aus der Frühzeit des japanischen Buddhismus (Nippon-koku-gembō-zenaku-ryō-i-ki)*. Tokyo: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens.
- DYKSTRA, Yoshiko Kurata. 1983. *Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sutra from Ancient Japan: The Dainihonkoku Hokekyōkenki of Priest Chingen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- ENDŌ Yoshimoto 遠藤嘉基 and KASUGA Kazuo 春日和男. 1967. *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記. (Nihon koten bungaku taikai 70). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- KAMENS, Edward. 1988. *The Three Jewels: A Study and Translation of Minamoto Tamenori's Sanbōe. (Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies 2)*. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan.

Christoph Kleine  
Marburg University