Review of Japanese Mythology in Film: A Semiotic Approach to Reading Japanese Film and Anime by Yoshiko Okuyama

Ronald S. Green
Coastal Carolina University, rgreen@coastal.edu

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I became interested in this book because I use many of the same films and anime it discusses in several of my undergraduate classes, specifically “Religion through Film” and “Representations of Japanese Religious Identity”. After reading it I decided to adopt the book for these two courses. Making the adoption easy, the author wrote it from notes for her own course titled “Japanese Mythology in Film” and now uses the book in that course. In this review, I will describe the book’s content and usefulness, and explain how it has led to further discussions in class.

When I first started reading the book, I was surprised at the author’s early assessment that the primary target audience is undergraduate students of Japanese and other languages. I had thought it was for the much more numerous students interested in approaching Japanese culture, history, and religions through anime and movies. I maintain that this is equally the case and that both these mediums and the book can be gateways for teaching mythology, film criticism, and, as Okuyama suggests, semiotics. The author makes a convincing argument that students better learn language by understanding something of the important cultural encoding in it. As I continued to read, I came to see the beauty in this argument and how it can be expanded beyond languages, while still incorporating etymologies, for example, to lessons on Shintō and Buddhism.

The preface tells us right away that this is not a book about mythology and that it makes no claim that the films are to be considered “Buddhist” or “Shintō”. The reader would be well advised to consider the preface, as it would otherwise be easy to criticize the book for all the reasons that reading a film as text has been amply criticized elsewhere. The preface establishes that the book is meant to help readers understand the cultural encoding in these films, not to engage in the many aspects of the study of mythology.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first describes the basics of semiotics, its methodology, and the value of applying semiotics to film studies. The second part applies semiotics to the task of broadening our understanding of eight well-known Japanese fictive films, including five animated films, all made in the last fifteen years or so. Because of the popularity of anime and Japanese popular culture generally, students are likely to love Part II of the book while perhaps remaining lukewarm about Part I. I have to confess, this was my experience as well. However, apart from the fact that it is a convention in academic studies to provide a critical
philosophical argument up front, Part I provides the language and definitions necessary for proceeding to Part II. A bonus for students with this attitude is that Part I has only 55 pages while Part II has just 157 pages. Significantly, in Part I, Chapter 2 gives us the definition for and examples of five types of tropes that will be key for the application to films covered in Part II. These tropes are metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Although one might think much of this is obvious, really, it’s not and teachers considering using this book should not ignore it. The author also defines basic ideas such as archetypes, motifs, and mythology.

Chapter 4 looks at various elements of storytelling, including narrative and plot. The author devotes most of the chapter to describing theories about story adaptation, including those related to filling in missing pieces of mythological tales. This is important to the semiotic approach, as she makes clear. This leads to ideas in the next chapter such as “revisionist culture” and the “dark side of storytelling from a semiotic perspective”, that is, the potential of films to confuse our perspective of reality (47). Chapter 5 is generally devoted to what movies can tell us about culture and so, why we should become literate in this area.

In Part II, the author begins with an analysis of the films Onmyōji and Onmyōji II in terms of their Shintō and Daoist motifs. This chapter is especially useful for teaching and learning religions through film, in part, because there are few films that represent Daoist beliefs outside of martial arts movies. The author makes the important note that Japanese Onmyō-dō (yin-yang tradition) uniquely incorporates Shintō elements but is also a reflection of Chinese yin-yang philosophy as adapted to Daoism. There is some potential for confusion with the book’s introduction of Five Element theory and the Yijing, Book of Changes. Without qualifiers, it is likely to appear to students that there has been just one entity called Daoism, definable by a single set of ideas and, conversely, that these principles and texts are exclusively Daoist. Because the Yijing is considered a Confucian classic, and because yin-yang and Five Element theory are not exclusive to any one tradition, students should be informed of how the traditions we call “Chinese religions” in classes, have historically developed as the dynamics of interacting individuals and groups.

In speaking about magic involving dolls in the films, the author says, “The original idea of hitogata (human figure) was brought from China and “the unfading popularity of dolls in Japan...all derive from the Taoist myth that pertains to the magical powers of hitogata” (72-3). This discussion to is a good opportunity to direct the class in a conversation about the origin of Japanese dolls that could alternately be found in the terracotta haniwa figures from the Kofun period (3rd to 6th centuries CE), the origin of which is unclear. Some students will be interested in this topic because of the popularity today of collectible Japanese figurines.

The chapter also describes the Shintō torii, gateway to a sacred place. On the author’s theme of understanding words, teachers could reference the image of the rooster (tori) in the Kojiki that roosted on the torii (bird abode) and crowed when the sun goddess Amaterasu emerged from the cave where she was hiding, which
might be a metaphor for the lengthening of days after the winter solstice. Since the book references Amaterasu in this chapter, teachers using it could also explain her possible mythological connection with Himiko, that ancient shamaness queen and first ruler of ancient Japan (Yamatai) that we know from historical documents. Likewise, Amaterasu is often depicted wearing a magatama necklace. Because magatama, also from the Kofun period and earlier, are curved (maga) jewels (tama) believed to house souls (also called tama), this discussion fits the doll motif but locates the belief of interring souls into inanimate objects in ancient Japan rather than China.

In Chapter 7, “Folklore Motifs in Spirited Away (2001) and Princess Mononoke (2000)”, there are nice discussions of kami-kakushi (divine abduction or being hidden by kami), tasogare (twilight), marebito (rare being or visiting deity), and iruikon (cross-species marriage). The author spends a good deal of time describing the mythological importance of rice and eating in the spirit world, which is central but easy to overlook in Spirited Away.

In the section on Princess Mononoke, Okuyama makes valuable observations about the word mononoke (thing of spirit), the source of the forest spirit mythology, and of kodama iconography from the Edo period. These and other observation from the section can be obscure but are importation. Until reading this, I was unaware that Kaya was Ashitaga's fiancé rather than his sister, a thought-provoking piece of information confirmed by filmmaker Miyazaki that the author provides in the book. Knowing this, for example, and given the significance of magatama mentioned above, gives us an additional opportunity to discuss of the significance of the jewel knife that passes from Kaya to Ashitaga to San, who uses it to stab Ashitaga in the chest. There appears to be something quite significant going on with the knife related to mythology that this book could help classes explore.

I share the author’s feeling expressed at the end of the chapter that there is an uncanny resemblance between the black goo that destroys Iron Town and videos of the 2011 Fukushima tsunami and power plant meltdown, which, of course, took place eleven years after the movie was made. However, we might as easily find in the scene a reference is to volcanoes rather than tsunamis. After reviewing the film in this light, I noticed that there are two attacks on Iron Town by nature under pressure. The first is volcanic-like goo (at 1:58) and the second is tsunami-like wind and water (at 2:05). In relation to both of the films discussed in this chapter, we can see the importance Miyazaki places on the idea of remembering who we really are versus accepting the dominant narrative of those in power, including religious and mythological aspects of identity as represented in these films.

Chapter 8, “Motifs of Buddhism and Folklore in Dororo (2007) and Departures (2008)” also provides understanding of terms used in the films, such as mamono (beings of evil power) and bakemono (beings that can transform). Okuyama offers the further insight that author Tezuka Osamu’s authoritarian father might be the model for Lord Daigo in Dororo. The book also convincingly connects
Dororo with the long-standing *kishu-ryūri-tan* (hero’s journey) motif, one of a noble person forced to become a wanderer in search of identity. The author comments on Buddhist mythology of the Bodhisattva Jizo in relation to saving Mizoka from suffering in the story. Similar iconography can be found in a number of other works of Tezuka as well.

For the Academy Award-winning film *Departures*, Okuyama describes and contrasts the film with the autobiographical work on which it is loosely based, *Nōkanfu nikki* (*Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician*) by Aoki Shinmon. The author interviewed Aoki and tells how Pure Land Buddhism is infused in the story, which was rather dramatically altered for the screenplay. She also gives readers some useful etymologies, such as for the word *okuribito* (people who see off), which is the Japanese title of the film.

Chapter 9, “Eclectic Myths in Mushi-shi (2001) and Cyborg Mythology of Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence (2004)”, is probably my favorite chapter in the book. One reason for this is that it is the only place in the volume where the author uses kanji as part of the etymological analysis. I would like to have seen this elsewhere, such as in the explanation of *kodama*, which also would have pointed to its Chinese equivalent. In particular, Okuyama uses pictographs to explain that *mushi* in the title does not mean “bugs” as is typically assumed, but, instead, is closer to “shape-shifting tricksters” in Shintō (170). This use of kanji is particularly fitting in this chapter, because in episode 1 of *Mushi-shi*, Shinra draws kanji that come alive. Okuyama also describes the elixir-of-life motif, as well as that of the Water God and Human Sacrifice, which include a rare narration on the old custom of abducting a passerby to be sacrificed as a human pillar of a bridge (179).

The treatment of *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* centers on comparisons to *Blade Runner* and other science fiction as well as to various old Japanese traditions, including those of geishas and *ukiyo-e*. The author points out that some writers consider cyborg narratives to be a new type of mythology in itself. While returning briefly to the use of dolls in Buddhism, the focus in this section is not on folktales, as in the other chapters. In class, this talk can be extended by again referencing *magatama* containing “souls” and discussing the fact that Shintō has interred souls in swords and other objects. Such can be found, for example, in the controversial nationalistic Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where souls of those who died in World War II are said to be enshrined. In this context, students are unlikely to miss the opportunity to reference *Fullmetal Alchemist* and other popular anime that use this motif. In *Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood*, as with the *magatama*, though Alphonse’s body dies, his brother inter his soul in a suit of armor by alchemical ritual and symbols.

The book is very much a first-person narrative and this makes it easy for students. The author speaks of her field research, talks about the pictures she took, and engages the reader with questions such as “why is this,” then proceeds to offer interpretations if not definitive answers. In fact, this is central to both the author’s
approach, that multiple interpretations are welcome, and her view of semiotics, that signs and symbols are only understandable in reference to other signs and symbols. It is only because she is convincing in arguing this that I was hesitant to accept her further insistence that applying semiotics to a film allows us to “objectively evaluate it” by breaking the code that is culturally agreed upon, not just personally preferred. Put another way, I feel that there is something vaguely contradictory about arguing both that semiotics rejects the notion that one ultimate “meaning” can ever be gleaned and also that semiotics gives us the ability to evaluate a film “objectively.”

Another slightly confusing point is that the book uses the Wade-Giles system of Chinese transliteration rather than Pinyin, that is, Taoism rather than Daoism and I-Ching rather than Yijing. Pinyin, the system of Mainland China, was officially adopted by the Library of Congress in 1997 and the American Library Association in 2001. This does not detract from the book, which is a wonderful exploration of the history, mythology, and literary sources of the characters and stories in the films. Instead, it became an opportunity to discuss with students the differences in transliteration systems and the future of cataloguing for East Asian studies.