

The Origin of Modern Shinto in Japan: The Vanquished Gods of Izumo. By Yijiang Zhong. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. xii + 260 pp. £76.49 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4742-7108-0.

This fascinating book situates religious changes in Japan from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in a global context, arguing that the emergence of “Shinto” was a response to challenges from Buddhists, but especially Christians. Yijiang Zhong demonstrates that Japanese intellectuals were grappling with the introduction of Western science and knowledge about Western political theories, as well as religion, in devising two forms of Shinto that displaced Buddhism as the dominant discourse in Japan, and combatted the influence of Christianity. Zhong’s historical study traces the rivalry between types of Shinto that elevated the kami Ōkuninushi, “Great Lord of the Land” (p. 17) and his shrine at Izumo, and the sun goddess Amaterasu and her shrine at Ise. He sets out to refute recent interpretations of Nativism exemplified by authors like Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) as a crude version of Emperor-centred nationalism. Hirata’s project proposed Ōkuninushi to support “a valorous human subject capable of resisting Russian invasion and saving Japan from national crisis” (p. 12), and drew upon more than a century of tradition since the Izumo shrine was transformed from a Buddhist influenced site dedicated to Susanoo, brother of Amaterasu, to a “Shinto” shrine focused on Ōkuninushi by the 1670s. Susanoo was a kami integrated into the “essence-trace” (p. 21) relationship that held that kami were only traces of Buddhist essences.

The history of Shinto is peculiarly tortuous and involves re-examination of texts, most importantly the eighth-century *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, and repurposing of sacred sites like Izumo and Ise, and large claims about indigeneity and political power. The promotion of Shinto began in the 1480s when Yoshida Kanemoto sought to recover the prestige of his priestly family by means of what he termed Yuiitsu Shinto (One and Only Shinto). Almost simultaneously Hayashi Razan (a former Buddhist priest and Neo-Confucian scholar) was promoting Principle-Mind Shinto. From the seventeenth century a dominant theme was the “Month without the Gods,” which argued for the primacy of Izumo because in the tenth month all the kami of Japan went, initially, to that region and later, specifically, to the shrine of Ōkuninushi. This theme supported the primacy of this creator god, and his association with marriage stretched his powers from the origin of the world to the ongoing maintenance of sacred order. It also connected Ōkuninushi with prosperity and consequent national popularity. From the late eighteenth century into the mid-nineteenth interest in strengthening Japanese individuals and community led to Hirata’s idea of the “Yamato soul” (Zhong gives a terrific analysis of how Hirata reads prohibited Catholic texts and domesticates

them to his own purposes) and rival scholars such as the neo-Confucian Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863) from the Mito area, who styled Amaterasu as “heavenly ancestor” (p. 135). Like Hirata, Aizawa kept a careful eye on the Russians and investigated Christianity and conversion strategies as tactics of the “Western barbarians” (p. 134) that necessitated the elevation of the kami to counter the Christian God.

The inauguration of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought the question of the role of religion in the newly modern and international Japan to the fore. In 1870 the Missionary Office issued statements on “Revering the Kami” and “Respecting the Emperor” (p. 145) which situated Amaterasu as the imperial ancestor and in control of the universe due to her embodiment in the sun. In the negotiations about religion that accompanied the foundation of the new state, Buddhism was resurgent, though in 1875 the joint Shinto-Buddhism program ended. The Meiji administration began by co-opting Shinto, but later Shinto was divided into State Shinto which was not religious but applied to all citizens and the polity, and Sect Shinto was a personal faith in various disestablished groups. This was not easy: as Zhong notes, Shinto priests “had to choose between being official ritualists or private religious people” (p. 193). The result was that Amaterasu was elevated to the guardian or guarantor of the Imperial office, where Ōkuninushi was demoted to an object of “private religion” (p. 199). This book is extraordinarily interesting and merits a wide readership. Zhong has written an exciting book uncovering a little-known story, a story that deserves to be fare better-known. I commend it to all students of religion.

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