

Retrospective Comprehension: Japanese Foretelling Songs*

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Is the world without predetermined meaning? Does caprice rule our affairs? Our ancestors asked such questions, and some answered in the negative, for they thought that the world did have a preset design, the god(s) were there, and they revealed their divine intention through obscure oracles.

The ancient Greeks set up a system of oracular communication in temples where, for example, the fate of Oedipus was delivered. The Sibylline Oracles predicted that eventually Corsica and Sardinia would sink in the sea by the smiting of the holy god. The oracles had to be enigmatic to protect themselves from exposure, as in the *Chaldaean Oracles* which say: "let fiery hope nourish you upon the Angelic plane." A parallel modern example is the Chinese fortune cookie, which dwells upon chance association that might bring a certain significance to the person who opened it. Shamans were known to give spectacular oracular performances, which we still see in the mountains and villages of Japan.¹ In each case the people lacked a belief that they could control the world and its future; they perceived themselves under the power of a supreme being(s), whose will must be learned in order to live better.

In Japan there was a form of oracle contained in the lyrics of popular songs which was not directly prophetic. The interpretation of the oracular message in these songs occurred after the event and was often inductive. It was conveyed not by a prophet, but rather disseminated by the masses. The interpretation was given in retrospect. The oracle answered the question regarding the purposefulness of the universe, but it did so by providing a retrospective understanding that a pre-

viously popular song actually was foretelling an event. The people, thinking that the event has been prescribed by the gods, tried to comprehend and accept it as their will.

THE CHINESE PRECEDENT

The origin of a notion that a song could foretell an event is found in ancient China. A legend recorded in *Shiji* 史記 presents a song sung by children in the streets during the reign of King Xuan 宣 (about 820 B.C.) of the Kingdom of Chou 周.

The bows of mountain mulberry and the quivers of *ji* 箕,
Destined are they to destroy Chou.²

There was a superstition that a song sung by children (unaware of its meaning) was sometimes an oracle of the gods. So the king became worried. Upon hearing that there was a merchant and wife who peddled the "bows of mountain mulberry and the quivers of *ji*," he sent men to kill them. But the couple escaped, saving a pretty little girl on their way. The girl grew up to be Baosi 褒姒, the Empire-tipping beauty who, with her costly smiles, became the cause of the downfall of King You 幽, the son of the worried King Xuan.

We see here that people considered the fall of Chou to have been foretold by the song, and therefore the end of the dynasty was prescribed by the gods. But in this legendary story the interpretation of the oracular message took place before the event. This particular Chinese legend illustrates only that the ancient Chinese believed in oracles. Yet the existence of such a legend must have strengthened subsequent belief in foretelling songs, leading to the creation and recording of similar episodes. In fact, foretelling songs are commonly found in the "Treatise on the Five Elements" section (*Wu-xing-zhi* 五行志) of the standard histories of China.

The songs were easy to memorize, as, for example, the following one from the *Hanshu* 漢書:

A decade and four years after
Crown Prince Gong 恭 was reburied,
Jin 晉 shall no longer prosper;
Prosperity will come to his elder brother (Wang 1900: ch. 16).

This song alludes to the tyranny of Duke Hui 惠 of the kingdom of Jin, who died fourteen years after his brother Gong. Therefore the song was considered to have foretold the take-over of the kingdom by Duke Hui's elder brother Duke Wen 文.

In reality, of course, prognostication of the future by such a means is impossible. No street songs foretell the future. What then were the social circumstances in which these songs originated and became popular, ultimately transforming themselves into songs predicting the future?

One explanation of their etiology refuses to take into account purposeful human interference, arguing that the songs originated spontaneously, becoming foretelling later because the events fitted into the lyrics. The connection is purely coincidental and made after the event, and it is this re-interpretation that transformed ordinary songs into foretelling songs after the incident had already occurred. An ancient Chinese explanation of this phenomena is given by Du Yu 杜預 (222–284 A.D.) who discussed the origin of a “spontaneous foretelling song” as a product of children’s word-play, which caught the attention of knowledgeable people who took the songs as a warning (Du 1955: 309–310). Du Yu implies that the artless songs of young children embody premonitions, which may or may not turn out to be true. He argued that it was this premonition that the learned and the prudent should take as signals and verify by future events for the sake of popular edification.

A second theory considers the songs to be artifices. They were composed and disseminated by the person who was planning to carry out the incident. For example, according to the *Chaoye Qianzai* 朝野僉載, Luo Binwang 駱賓王, a gifted poet of the late 7th century who was a stern critic of the oppressive government of Empress Wu 武 (623–705 A.D.), composed a foretelling song:

One flicker of flame,
Two flickers of flame,
A child in a scarlet robe
Shall sit in the Palace (Zhang 1965: ch. 4).

The children in the neighborhood were instructed to sing the song, thereby fulfilling the prerequisite that children could unconsciously prophesy. But this was a trick to incite Pei Yan 裴炎, the chief Imperial Secretary. Pei Yan’s family name is a homonym of “scarlet (*pei* 緋)” and the personal name Yan is a vertical coupling of “fire (*huo* 火).” The song, taken by unsuspecting Pei Yan as the voice of the gods, persuaded him to rise against the government, so that he, “a child in a scarlet robe,” “shall sit in the Palace.” In this case the children’s songs became a tool of political intrigue. Such songs, it is argued, could have been planted in order to manipulate the minds of

people.

The ninth century *Nanxiao shewen* 南郊赦文 is a collection of sayings and decrees produced by Emperor Xizong 僖宗. He was concerned about social unrest prevalent at the time and forbade anonymous fabrication of children's songs, threatening the offenders with "severe punishment" (Tsuchihashi 1968: 290). Another similar case found in the *Zuoshuan* 春秋 (Legge 1970: 187) prompted Takezoe Kōkō to conclude that the lyrics of popular street songs were fabricated by scheming villains, who used them to rouse the people (Takezoe 1960: 34). This second explanation is appealing, but it does not apply to all foretelling songs of ancient China. At times the lyrics are too vague to suspect fabrication, or, as in the case of the reburied Crown Prince Gong, too exact in timing (fourteen years) to credit a scheme which could not have avoided chance occurrences.

In a third theory, children's songs were fabricated after the fact either by the party involved in the incident or by the recording historian. For example, the following lyric is too specific to have not been composed after the incident:

Grass of a thousand leagues,
Green indeed it is;
'They foretold ten days,
But he could not survive (Sima 1965: 3285).

The historians of the *Houhanshu* 後漢書 explain that "grass of a thousand leagues" couples together as *dong* 董, and ten days fortune as *zhuo* 卓, signifying the name Dong Zhuo, the usurper. Indeed the lyric describes the historical events precisely, for Dong Zhuo's abortive rebellion lasted exactly ten days.

It seems that these three explanations are not mutually exclusive. The first might have been the original practice, the second a clever utilization of popular belief to one's advantage, and the third a technique that became conventional in recording history, particularly in "The Treatise on the Five Elements." Some of the ever present children's songs permitted associative interpretation. There was also artificial input, inserted by schemers with their own purposes. When recording them became a practice, the historians retrieved songs from the Court or the street, or they themselves might have composed appropriate songs.

Such was the case in China. By contrast, the interpretation of the Japanese foretelling songs came after the event, as discussed below.

THE JAPANESE FORETELLING SONG

Nihon Shoki

The Chinese foretelling songs, called “ children’s songs (*tongyao* 童謠)” were transmitted to Japan and the Japanese historians of the 8th century incorporated them into the *Nihon Shoki*, compiled in 720 A.D.³ Of 128 songs inserted in the text, eleven predict social or political incidents. Primarily they were included so that this historical record of Japan would be regarded as authentic in the Chinese mode, an aspiration shared by all involved with *Nihon Shoki*. However, the Chinese term *tongyao* was rendered into Japanese as *waza uta*. *Waza* in this case means “ work,” giving the translation “ work-performing songs ” (Masui 1977: 7-24). This is a free translation reflecting the notion that the songs performed *waza* (a function), which was to foretell the future.

In the eleven foretelling songs of the *Nihon Shoki*, we see an attempt to adapt the Chinese concept to Japanese material. Yet the attempt was not satisfactory, since only four have a format corresponding to the Chinese usage, equipped with (a) the time of the event, (b) the song which was popular prior to the occurrence of the event, and (c) the interpretation of the lyric by *shūsho* or *shikisha* 識者 (knowledgeable people) who connected metaphors of the lyric with real events. For example, in 643, there was a song:

Iwa no e ni	Up on the cliff,
Kozaru kome yaku	A little monkey is baking rice;
Kome dani mo	At least, eat the rice
Tagete tōrase	and pass on,
Kamashishi no oji,	you mountain goat old man. ⁴

According to the people of the time, “ Up on the cliff ” referred to *kamitsumiya* 上宮, the Upper Palace of Ikaruga 斑鳩 village where a Prince by the name of Yamashiro 山背 resided. He was the son of Prince Shōtoku 聖德 (574-622) and that made him a contender for the throne. “ A little monkey ” refers to Soga no Iruka 蘇我入鹿, the son of Minister Soga no Emishi 蘇我蝦夷. Soga no Iruka attacked Prince Yamashiro at his Upper Palace that year to make Prince Furuhiito 古入 the next Emperor. “ Baking ” refers to the burning of the Prince Yamashiro’s Palace. Before committing suicide, the Prince hid in the mountains for several days without food, which explains the line “ at least eat the rice and pass on. ” Prince Yamashiro also had white hair resembling that of a mountain goat.

But, Japanese scholars feel that the song originally had no rele-

vance to political messages (Ide 1952: 13-20; Kojima 1955: 1-14; Tanabe 1965: 567; I'suchihashi 1976: 333-334). The song was more likely sung at a mountain picnic where goats and monkeys were familiar animals. In those days, people gathered in spring and autumn to celebrate the forthcoming harvest, to view the country, and to pick herbs. The greatest fun however was cooking-out and the "song-encounter (*utagaki* 歌垣)," in which cross-singing between men and women resulted in a carefree match-making and love play. In such a surrounding, there may have been a teasing song addressed to an old man who, while not invited for the amorous performance, should "at least eat the rice and pass on" (I'suchihashi 1976: 333-334).

Similarly, the other three intact foretelling songs of *Nihon Shoki* could have come from this song-encounter tradition.

Haro haroni	From afar off
Kotoso Kikoyuru	Words are heard—
Shima no yabuhara.	The bush-field of Shima 嶋."

In the warm night, the couples talk in the bushes, in the field called Shima.

Ochikata no	Unlike the rustling pheasants of Asano,
Asano no kigishi	Far in the distance,
Toyomosazu	I loved and slept in secret,
Ware wa neshikado	In silence,
Hitoso toyomosu.	But they know, and talk.

Another song follows:

Obayashi ni	I know not the face,
Ware o hikiirete	Nor do I even know the house
Seshi hito no	Of him who did it,
Omote mo shirazu	Having led me
Ie mo shirazumo.	Into the little wood (Aston 1956: 188).

Several pages later the *Nihon Shoki* reports that a certain person deciphered these songs as portents of the plot to assassinate Soga no Iruka. Prince Naka no Ōe 中大兄 hatched the plot together with his subject Nakatomi no Kamako 中臣鎌子, and it was the "words" of their conference that were "heard" in the song. Soga no Iruka, known as the Minister of "Shima (Island)" because he had an artificial island in his mansion, became the topic of the song. In the second song, the one who "loved and slept in secret, in silence" was identified as Prince Yamashiro who died without fighting when Soga no Iruka at-

tacked him the year before. "But they," meaning Prince Naka no Ōe and Nakatomi no Kamako, "knew" about it, and "talked." The third song is the scene of assassination: Soga no Iruka did not know the "face" nor the "house" of the assassins (Saeki no Muraji Komaro 佐伯連子麻呂 and Waka Inukai no Muraji Amita 稚犬養連網田). These three songs, popular in 644, were thus considered to be foretelling that Soga no Iruka would be murdered and that Prince Yamashiro would be avenged the next year, which actually happened in 645.

There are seven more foretelling songs in the *Nihon Shoki*, but none of them is as complete in presentation as the above four. This may be due to an insufficient mastery of editorial technique on the part of the historians. It could be also because the pertinence of the songs was no longer clear at that later date. Most of the songs, with their simple and direct content, reflect a popular, everyday origin. They were adopted in Court and the compilers, whose primary purpose was to authenticate their history against that of China, included them in the *Nihon Shoki*.⁵ As we see in the text, they did not provide the sequential arrangement, dates, and allusions for all the songs. But they believed that the "fact" of foretelling songs was of historical importance and thus made an effort to preserve them.

Shoku Nihongi

Five more national histories were compiled after the *Nihon Shoki*, in 797, 840, 869, 879, 901. Four of them contain foretelling songs.⁶ The riddle-like nature of the individual lyrics remains, but they catch our interest because they deal uniformly with one topic: the destinies of Crown Princes.

In those days, the polygamous court marriages produced more than one candidate for Crown Prince. Maternal lineage was important in terms of pedigree; power and heirship passed among the elder princes, their brothers, cousins, uncles and nephews (Inoue 1966: 179-223; Naoki 1980: 315-326), making it impossible to select the Crown Prince by strict primogeniture. This meant that the selection left room for private intrigues which became central concerns at court. It was thus helpful to know the will of the gods expressed through the foretelling songs.

What gods were these? In China the Han Dynasty historians believed in *chenwei* 讖緯, the study of the heavenly bodies, which were thought to be the causes of all worldly matters. They also believed in the *wuxing* 五行 which regarded the Five Elements (fire, water, earth, metal and wood) as constituting all physical objects on earth. In this context, the foretelling songs were a sign of the interaction of such

powers.

Upon transmission to Japan, however, such ideas did not become mainstream. Instead, we find in the Japanese histories an extreme sensitivity to all mysterious matters, which are expressed through accounts of witchcraft, sorcery, Taoistic rituals, Yin-Yang thought, divinations, auspicious and ominous songs, etc. People made little systematic attempt to articulate the cause behind these mysteries by relating them, for example, to the doctrines given by the gods. In return, the gods demanded little obedience nor any specific effort on the part of the people. The gods were a generalized supreme force that governed the world, a divine caprice that could not be clearly defined. Under such incomprehensible tyranny people were fearful. They tried everything that was remotely suggestive of improving their situation, taking an eclectic approach: the head of the Yin-Yang Ministry of the Palace was sent to calm the flood in 797 (Kuroita 1937c: 33), while a shaman was called in from the streets in 805 to diagnose Emperor Kanmu's 桓武 illness, whereupon it became clear that the (Shinto) god of Isonokami 石上 Shrine had caused it (Kuroita 1937c: 58). Moreover the Buddhist Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra was recited to exorcise the evil spirits that appeared in the Palace in 839 (Kuroita 1937: 58). The gods of the foretelling songs of ancient Japan were therefore a diffuse supernatural power whose main task was to predetermine, and thus to persuade the people of inevitability of things, as is evident in the following examples.

In 770, on the day the Sovereign Empress Shōtoku 稱徳 passed away, Prince Shirakabe 白壁 (meaning "white wall") was invested as Crown Prince. What led to his selection was his marriage to Princess Ikami 井上 (meaning "above the well"), the half-sister of the late Empress. The Prince came to the throne as Emperor Kōnin 光仁 the same year, and it is recorded in the *Shoku Nihongi* 續日本紀 (completed in 797) that the following song was popular before his ascension:

Kazurakidera no mac naruya	In front of Kazuraki 葛城 Temple,
Toyora no tera no nishi naruya	To the west of Toyora 豊浦 Temple,
Oshitodo, toshitodo,	Oshitodo, toshitodo,
Sakurai ni	At the Sakura well 櫻井,
Shiratama shizukuya	The white jewel is submersed,
Yoki tama shizukuya	The beautiful jewel is submersed,
Oshitodo, toshitodo,	Oshitodo, toshitodo,
Shikashiteba kuni zo Sakayu-	Soon the country shall flourish,

ruya	
Wagiycrazo sakayuruya	Our house will prosper,
Oshitodo, toshitodo.	Oshitodo, toshitodo
	(Kuroita 1937b: 383).

The interpretation by the “ knowledgeable ” people was that *i* 井 (well) was the name of the Princess, *shirakabe* 白壁 (wall), His Majesty’s name, implying that he is the one who will ascend the throne (Kuroita 1937b: 383). There is a resemblance between the characters *kabe* and *tama*; the addition of one stroke and a dot to *kabe* 壁 changes it into *tama* 璧. The implication is that submersed in the “ Well ” (Princess Ikami) is the “ White Jewel / Wall ” (Prince Shirakabe) who will bring prosperity to his “ house ” as well as to the whole “ country.”⁷

The selection of Prince Shirakabe was not without dispute, because in the conference the main-stream Fujiwara 藤原 faction supported the Prince, while the other faction wanted Fun-ya no Kiyomi no Mahito 文室淨三真人 (Kuroita 1937c: 244). The choice did not have to fall upon Prince Shirakabe. The song therefore legitimizes the choice in retrospect, as fulfillment of the designs of the gods.

The song seems to predate its inclusion in the *Shoku Nihongi*. In the 6th century, the founder of the Soga clan, Soga no Iname 蘇我稲日 built Sakurai 櫻井 Temple. His son Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 re-built it and called it Toyora 豊浦 Temple, thereby earning for himself the name Toyora no Otodo 豊浦大臣 (Kadowaki 1978: 33–34). Kazuraki 葛城 Temple is located to the southeast of Toyora Temple where Soga no Iruka (assassinated in 645) lived. These two spots are near, located at the north and east sides of Amagashi 嵯峨 Hill, Nara prefecture. The *tama*, meaning jewel or pearl, and a common metaphor for a beautiful female, might refer to a daughter of the Soga clan who was expected to bring prosperity by bearing sons in the Imperial harem. The song thus might have celebrated the birth of a female baby in the “ house ” of Soga, and in fact, Soga daughters produced several Emperors and Princesses.⁸ After the fall of the Soga in 645, the song persisted among the people of the area, partly through a wish for the return of previous prosperity, for other Soga members (such as Soga no Kurayamada no Omi Ishikawamaro 蘇我倉山田石川麻呂) (Aston 1956: 196) survived at Court after 645.

The refrain “ oshitodo, toshitodo ” sounds like a stomping beat, and makes us wonder if it was sung and danced to. What supports this supposition is the fact that this song is preserved also among the *saibara* 催馬樂, the popular songs of the 8th and 9th centuries.⁹ The lyric of the *saibara* version is identical, except for the name of the well

which is given as E no ha i 榎葉井 (Huckleberry Leaf Well), instead of Sakurai (Cherry Well) (Yamai 1966: 43-47).

Also contemporary is the oldest collection of legends of Japan called *Nihon Ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (Nakamura 1973: 276-279). In tale no. 38, the author Kyōkai 景戒 recorded several foretelling songs as illustrations of his belief that foretelling did occur as the result of supernatural designs. One of these tales contains the same song, where the first line is changed to "In the direction of the morning sun" (instead of "In front of Kazuraki Temple") and has the time-beating refrain "oshiteya, oshiteya," instead of "oshitodo, toshitodo." Kyōkai was a privately ordained monk who lived in Nara at the time when the capital had already moved to Kyoto. He completed his work in 823, twenty-six years after the second national history, the *Shoku Nihongi*, had been compiled. Did he copy the song from the *Shoku Nihongi*? This is unlikely because he also recorded the foretelling song that appears in the *Nihon Kōki* 日本後記, completed in 840, which postdates his work by seventeen years. Because of this entry it seems that he independently recorded the song, suggesting that the songs were widely known at the time.

The above suggests that the song was a popular song, free from tampering by the Court, by Kyōkai himself, or by the anonymous *saibara* song collector. It might be of the Soga heritage, and upon the investiture of Prince Shirakabe as Crown Prince it was cited afresh as a foretelling song to affirm what had taken place. This is what I mean by comprehension in retrospect.

Nihon Kōki

The next foretelling song from the *Nihon Kōki* is related to Emperor Kanmu who is known for moving the capital from Nara to Kyoto in 794. Before he ascended to the throne he was called Prince Yamabe 山部, and the song states:

Ōmiya ni	Facing straight toward
Tadani mukaeru	The Grand Palace,
Yabe no saka	Is the slope of Yabe 野倍;
Itaku nafumiso	Don't step on it hard,
Tsuchi niwa aritomo.	Although it is mere soil
	(Kuroita 1937c: 55-56).

The name of the slope "Yabe" referred to Yamabe, the Prince. The "Grand Palace" signified his accession. The divine message is that the slope carrying his august name should not be carelessly stamped

upon, since he was to ascend the throne later.

There was a dispute over the circumstances surrounding his investiture. Three years after Emperor Kōnin (Prince Yamabe's father, and the former Prince Shirakabe) ascended the throne, his Empress was suddenly divested of her rank for exercising sorcery. Her son, the current Crown Prince, met with a similar fate (Kuroita 1937b: 401 and 404). With the support of Fujiwara Momokawa 藤原百川,¹⁰ Prince Yamabe was installed as the new Crown Prince and needless to say the circumstantial evidence points to the intervention of the Fujiwara clan in the exposure of the Empress' sorcery (Hayashi 1969: 158-166).

The connection between the name of the Prince Yamabe, and the slope "Yabe" is feeble, but it was nevertheless read into the song. "Soil" could refer to the Prince, first to his earlier subordinate status in Court, and second, to his lowly maternal background. He came to the fore only after his father unexpectedly ascended the throne. "Soil" could therefore be juxtaposed to his accession to the throne, which is often alluded to as "heaven." His maternal lineage of the Haji 土師 clan, meaning "soil-master," may also have contributed to identifying him with the song. Since their immigration from Korea, the Haji clan is known to have specialized in professions having to do with earth, such as mound-building and pottery production (Murao 1963: 169).

Other interpretations are possible. For example, the capital of Nara, which was confined in the narrow plain of Yamato 大和, had many mountains and hills around it. A slope called "Yabe" actually existed at the time,¹¹ and it could have been one of the declines that faced on the Palace, giving a passer-by a direct view of the interior. For such a privilege, he is told "don't step on it hard, although it is mere soil." This is quite possible when one recalls that such respectful attitudes were prevalent in Japan up until 1945, when riders in street-cars passing the Imperial Palace in Tokyo took off their hats and bowed. Upon the investiture of Prince Yamabe, the song became prominent and the interpretation evolved on the allusiveness of its lyrics. Thus Kyōkai recorded the song as tale no. 38 of the *Nihon Ryōiki* and seventeen years later, the historians of the *Nihon Kōki* also recorded it, confirming to us that the song was an historical fact and that its character underwent transformation after the event.

Shoku Nihon Kōki

The next foretelling song in the *Shoku Nihon Kōki* 續日本後記 (869) is also about a Crown Prince, but this time a deposed one. On the 13th day of the 8th month, 842, Crown Prince Tsunesada 恒貞 left the Palace on a man-powered palanquin (a privilege given to an incumbent suc-

cessor to the throne). Once outside the Palace, at a street corner, he changed to an ox-carriage and went southward through the districts of Kyoto to his private residence. Prior to this incident, a foretelling song said:

Ame niwa biwa o zo utsunaru	In heaven they play the Biwa lute
Tama no ko no suso hiku no	In the district where lovely maid-
hō ni	ens trail their skirts,
Ushikuruma wa yokemuya	How good, the ox-carriage?
Kara chisa no ojisa no hana.	Bitter snowbell, little blossom of snowbell (Kuroita 1937c: 143).

This was the time when the Fujiwara clan, led by Yoshifusa 良房, aspired to manage the imperial succession by match-making politics but had not yet attained firm control. Such attempts at hegemony had begun when Prince Tsunesada was invested, for at this time Yoshifusa's sister and Emperor Ninmyō 仁明 already had a Prince. It was only a matter of time before the Crown Prince would be replaced by the new Fujiwara Prince, as happened in 842 in connection with the Jōwa 承和 Incident.¹² Although Prince Tsunesada's involvement with the plot was not substantiated, he was deposed and was replaced by Prince Michiyasu 道康 who ascended as Emperor Montoku 文德 eight years later. The foretelling song diverts the suspicion that the deposition was of Fujiwara design. "In heaven they play the Biwa lute" may refer to the musically active Court, led by Emperors Saga 嵯峨 and Ninmyō.¹³ The deposed Prince left this "heaven" and found himself in a city district called *bō* 坊, which puns with the Crown Prince Residence. There he had to change into an ox-carriage which is far less comfortable than the palanquin, and to this the phrase "how good, the ox-carriage?" applied. "Bitter snowbell" recalls the spicy sour flavor of this edible plant¹⁴ and the equally sour fate of the innocent Prince.

The Period that preceded this incident was characterized by a swing back to Chinese culture, mainly because of Emperor Saga (809–823). The best classical Chinese poetry collections were compiled under his auspices. He was highly cultivated in music and he welcomed the new Biwa music which was brought back by Fujiwara Sada-toshi 藤原貞敏 (807–867) from China (Tanabe 1966: 2558). The palace was changed to Chinese style.¹⁵ The city planning of Kyoto was consolidated and major east-west streets and north-south avenues divided the city into districts (Fujiki 1964: 114). Ox-carriages, although very costly to build and maintain, became so popular that prohibition de-

crees limiting their use were issued in 815, 839 and 846 (Endō 1980: 65). Chinese medicine flourished in the early 800s under Emperor Saga, and his son Emperor Ninmyō gave land to set up an herb garden in 839 (Nakano 1972: 75). *Kara* 辛, bitter, puns with *kara* 唐, Chinese. This “bitter” and “Chinese” snowbell could have been a new cure; snowbell is still used as a diuretic in modern Chinese medicine (Shimizu 1977: 98).

This song, sung on the streets of Kyoto in the early ninth century, is all about the fads of that era: Biwa lute played in heaven (court), lovely maiden’s Chinese-style skirts, divided districts, the ox-carriage, and the snowbell. It is likely that people, always fond of novelty, gossiped through a song such as this, and the deposition of the Prince gave them more reason to develop their gossip, redefining it as a foretelling song.

Nihon Sandai Jitsuroku

Another foretelling song of the Heian period marks the conclusion of the foundation era for the Fujiwara clan. Prince Michiyasu who replaced the divested Prince Tsunesada was wedded to the daughter of Fujiwara Yoshifusa. The birth of Prince Korehito 惟仁 came in 850, in which year the young father became Emperor Montoku (850–858). Nine months later, the baby Prince was invested as Crown Prince, ahead of his three elder brothers whose mothers were not of Fujiwara lineage. When Prince Korehito ascended the throne as Emperor Seiwa 清和 in 858, the maternal grandfather Yoshifusa became Prime Minister and Regent, the highest rank attainable by a subject. *Nihon Sandai Jitsuroku* 日本三代實錄, completed in 901, presents a foretelling song which was prevalent before the investiture of Prince Korehito:

Ōe o koete	Flying over boughs,
Hashiri koete	Running and flying over,
Agari odorikoete	Climbing, leaping and flying over,
Waga mamoru taniya	Hunting in the paddy I guard,
Saguri asari hamu shigiya	Hunting and eating,—the snipe,
Ōi shigiya.	The robust snipe
	(Kuroita 1937f: 3).

“Boughs” were deciphered as Prince’s three elder brothers; the will of heaven was that the Crown Prince be instituted by leaping over them.

The snipe is a migratory bird that comes from Siberia and remains in Japan to spend the winter in the wet rice paddies. It is no bigger

than a pond-duck, but the wings are sharp and long (about 13 cm) and its flight is swift and powerful. As a commonly seen bird since antiquity, it was also valued as game meat (Naora 1968: 123). The scene of the song is a rice paddy where a farmer guards his crop against field mice, wild hogs, etc. Here snipes fly about, hunting small fish in the muddy water. In the *Man'yōshū* 萬葉集, the "paddy I guard" is a metaphor for a girl; the man who guards it is the fiancé of the girl, and if one follows this line of thought, the "robust snipe" which flew, ran, climbed and leapt to hunt in the paddy must be the unabashed lover.

In my view, however, the simple lyric of this song does not seem to indicate such worldly passions. It means what it says, being probably a party song of a rural community, sung by the people who felt rapport with the bird and the farming life. The song then became known in the city, and after the investiture of the baby Crown Prince, people started saying that it foretold the unusual selection. The members of Fujiwara clan could have encouraged this interpretation.

Edo Period

The stability of the Fujiwara dominance for the ensuing two hundred years removed foretelling songs from the Japanese historical records. That is, when the mode of succession to the throne became settled within the Fujiwara clan, there was no need for a retrospective comprehension contrived by introducing the divine intentions of the gods. The rise of the warriors in the 13th century seemed to have eliminated the function of the foretelling songs in justifying the acquisition and control of power. The nation went through a series of civil wars until the beginning of the 17th century, in the course of which many of the written records were destroyed. The Ōnin 應仁 War (1467-1477) brought extensive destruction to Kyoto, and many of the cultural and historical treasures were burnt to the ground. We have reason to think, however, that the ancient tradition of comprehending reality by foretelling songs persisted throughout these times, for they revived as peace prevailed under the Tokugawa Shōgunate (1603-1867).

The Shōgunate brought an oppressive but internally tranquil regime upon the people, under which a wide range of literature was produced and preserved. Since politics was not a discussable topic, there occurred a shift in the topics the foretelling songs dealt with: the natural and man-caused disasters of the times, instead of Crown Princes.

In 1657, the Great Fire of the Meireki 明暦 Era destroyed much of the city of Edo. In connection with this fire a song called "Shigaki bushi 柴垣節" (the lyrics have been lost) became a foretelling song. An account given in *Musashi abumi* むさしあぶみ, a short essay written

by a story-teller Asai Ryōi 浅井了意, unravels the typical process.

“Shigakibushi originated as a rice-hulling song in the Northern Provinces. At even formal parties it became the foremost form of entertainment. Then, sure enough, every house now was fenced with brushwood, and most of the people—burnt by fire, and having nowhere to escape, died within their brushwood fences” (Asai 1929: 765–766).

It was accompanied with wild dancing, which was another factor for its popularity. In this case, the title of the song was considered to foretell, for it referred to the fate of the people who were to lose houses and had to live in make-shift shacks fenced with *shigaki*, the brushwood.

Another song became popular during the Genbun 元文 Era (1736–1741) through Kabuki and puppet plays:

Mireba miwatasu	Viewing the river,
Sao sasha todokuni	I reach to places with my pole;
Naze ni todokanu waga omoi.	Why doesn't my love reach her
	(Fujita 1969: 89–90)?

The *Edobushi Kongenki* 戸江節根元記 gives the derivation of this song in relation to its foretelling character: “At that time, the flood of Kantō 関東 broke the Sarugamata 猿がまた Bank; the people of Honjo 本所 and Fukagawa 深川 said that the song has been predicting the disaster all along” (Gushō-an 1910: 30). The relevance of the song to the flood seems to us rather remote (in its reference to using the “pole” in the river-like flood water). Yet it affected the people who were shaken by the disaster. Ōta Nanpo 太田南畝 confirms the time factor, showing his interest in the matter: “The song became popular prior to the great flood of 1742. It is not correct that the song was popular at the time of the flood” (Ōta 1927: 751).

Similarly, there was a foretelling song that presumably predicted the Great Fire of Bunka 文化 in 1806. Its playful and simple lyric, based on the legend of the 12th century hero Benkei 辨慶, reminds us that the ancient foretelling songs were children's songs:

Musashibō Benkei wa	Benkei the monk of Musashi 武藏,
Harima no kunide sodaterare	Raised in the Province of Ha- rima 播磨,
Mittsu no ue wa yotsu itsu muttsu, Nanatsu dōgu o sena ni oi	Next to three is four, five, six, Seven things he carried on the back,

Gojō no hashi e isogaruru.

Rushing to get to the Gojō
Bridge
(Akatsuki 1929: 501-502).

If we decipher this song from the *Kinrai kenbun hanashi no nae* 近來見聞
噺の苗 and add our supplementary explanation (given in parentheses) it
is: “If you divide the character (of *bō* 坊, the monk, which consists
of two radicals *tsuchi* 土 [ground] and *kata* 方 [direction]), it is read as
‘the direction of Musashi’ (Edo was located in the southern part of the
Province of Musashi) which is (burnt down to) the ground. ‘Seven
things he carried on his back, rushing’ is the proof that the song re-
flected real life (in which one carried things on their back, hurrying to
escape from fire.)” Again, the double meanings and puns charac-
terized the song as foretelling the fire.

Modern Era

To recall that a foretelling song, obviously to us a superstition, survived
through the modernization period of Japan and surfaced again in the
1920s is to understand humbly that our systems of thought do not
change very much in a century’s time, or for that matter, in ten cen-
turies’ time.

Remembered as the gravest natural disaster of modern Japan, the
Kantō earthquake surpasses in its impact and damage the previous
disasters of the Edo period. On September 1, 1923, a quake of mag-
nitude 7.9 shook the Tokyo area half an hour before lunch time. Flames
ignited by the cooking fires, as well as actual geological forces, were
responsible for the destruction of some 700,000 houses, claiming nearly
100,000 lives (*Tokyo hyakunenshi henshū iinkai* 1972: 1133). A song
called *Sendō kouta* 船頭小歌 gradually gained popularity that year prior
to the earthquake, chiefly through a film (Tanaka 1964: 249-250).

Ore wa kawara no karesusuki	A withered plume grass by the river I am;
Onaji omae mo karesusuki	And you, too, a withered plume grass,
Dōse futari wa kono yo dewa	In this life, the two of us
Hana no sakanai karesusuki.	Are destined never to bloom

(*Nihon no shiika* 1968: 246).

Soon after the earthquake the song came to be regarded as having fore-
told the destruction of Tokyo, predicting that the blossoming metro-
polis would be turned into a wilderness covered by plume grass.¹⁶
Spreading among the shaken people, the allusive lyrics of the song

persuaded so many that this song eventually became recorded as "the modern outbreak" of the foretelling songs, as seen in *Tokyo Hyakunenshi* 東京百年史, an official history published by the Metropolitan Government of Tokyo. As before, there is no documentation that elucidates the origins of this rumor. Tsuchihashi Yutaka discusses the possibility that it could have been instigated purposefully by an unnamed government official or by the novelist Kōda Rohan 幸田露伴 (1867-1947) (Tsuchihashi 1968: 272-274). However, no such government official has been identified, and Kōda Rohan explicitly stated that he found the rumour distasteful (Kōda 1954: 166-167).

I conclude that there was no single instigator of the concept. At the time of the disaster, it came to the mind of someone, or perhaps many, that this popular song carried meaning. Stricken by the calamity, people sought to comprehend the earthquake in familiar, traditional human terms, and this made them vulnerable to the idea of a mysterious prediction by a song. The earthquake and the song were linked together, each explaining the other. The rumor that it was a foretelling song spread, gaining credibility as the number of believers increased. The function it performed was consistent with its predecessors. It helped in comprehending and accepting the misfortune in retrospect. An absurd device, but it caught people's fancy by its very obscure relevance.

CONCLUSION

The insight that all events have factual causes was never very prevalent in Japanese society at large until recent times. This left inexplicable matters attributed to the supernatural. After all, it is a human instinct to abhor uncertainty and randomness; the world must have a purpose and meaning, and cruelty caused by the contrary was unbearable. Thus perplexity and disappointments encountered in life had to be explained, and one way of doing it was by finding messages from the foretelling songs. The connection between the songs and the events was obscure, which was the reason why oracular messages could be construed from the lyrics in the first place. After the incident, the street songs were re-evaluated, and this process did not require a prophet qualified for the interpretation. Unspecified knowledgeable people sufficed. These songs thrived on their obscure nature, and they worked primarily to affirm and make acceptable what had already taken place. They were the means to comprehend events, by placing the prophecy back in time.

I have yet to discover a post-war Japanese foretelling song, but the translation of *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* sold well a few years back.

Another foretelling song might be on the way, since much of our lives will never be fully comprehended—be it present, past or future.

NOTES

* Unless otherwise stated, translations of the songs from the original texts are by the present author.

1. The oracle for the fate of Oedipus came from the Temple of Delphi (Tripp 1970: 421); the Sibylline oracles have been translated from early Hellenistic-Jewish texts (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge 1918). The enigmatic Chaldaean oracle is said to have been recorded by Julianus the Theurgist (1978: 49). First hand experience with the Japanese shamans is reported by Blacker (1975: 252 and 279).

2. For the English translation of the episode, see Chavanne 1967: 283.

3. In the *Kojiki*, some songs suggest the earlier concept of a song functioning as an oracle (Philippi 1969: 205-206). Also, songs Nos. 20-21, 66-70 and 71-72 are premonitory, although not clear.

4. The translation is modified by myself from Aston 1956: 181.

5. There are other unconventional interpretations regarding this point. Yamagami (1965: 17-45) suggests that these foretelling songs were disseminated by shamans. Kubota (1969: 208) believes that they came about in the Court as party songs. Kazamaki (1970: 53) classifies them as a part of religious ceremony.

6. Toya (1955: 14-22) concluded that these songs appear solely to justify political schemes designed by the Fujiwara clan to invest Princes of Fujiwara lineage. My view differs from his in that the songs were not included under strict Fujiwara control; they were widely available as common knowledge of the society.

7. The practice of *bi hui* 避諱, avoiding the use of the names of the sovereign, might have been a factor in concluding that "white jewel" was equally pertinent. Whether or not this Chinese practice was adopted fully in the Japanese Court is not conclusive, as discussed by Hozumi 1926.

8. Empress Suiko 推古, Emperors Yōmei 用明 and Sushun 崇峻 were the children of Soga no Iname's daughters, and Princes Yamashiro and Furuhiito, of Soga no Umako's daughters (Kadowaki 1978: 66-67).

9. According to the obituary in *Nihon Sandai Jitsuroku*, Princess Hiroi 廣井 who died in 859 was well-versed in *saibara* (Saeki 1940b: 65).

10. It is recorded in *Kugyō Bunin* 公卿補任 (Kuroita 1938: 53) that Fujiwara Momokawa "devised unorthodox plans, and finally deposed Osabe and made Emperor Kanmu Crown Prince."

11. Reference to "Yabe" is made in the introduction of the poem no. 269 of *Man'yōshū* as: "A poem of Slope of Yabe" (Omodaka 1977: 111).

12. Jōwa no Hen 承和の變 is an incident in which Tomo no Kowamine 伴健岑 and Tachibana no Hayanari 橘逸勢 were arrested for treason. The existence of such a plan and the alleged involvement on the part of Crown Prince Tsunesada (although he was innocent) was used by Fujiwara Yoshifusa to install his nephew Prince Michiyasu as the new Crown Prince.

13. Yoshida called it a "revolutionary period of Japanese ancient music" (1913: 256). For example, the obituary of Emperor Ninmyō in the *Shoku Nihon Kōki* praises his musical expertise (Kuroita 1937c: 238).

14. In the songs of *Taue Zōshi* 田植草子, "snowbell" appears as a vegetable commonly served in rural life (Manabe 1974: 941).

15. It is recorded in the *Nihon Kōki*, for example, that Emperor Saga decreed in 816 that all palace costumes be changed to Chinese style (Saeki 1940a: 128).

16. Kojima personally remembers this process (Kojima 1959: 19). This is also a personal experience reported by Yamaji (1973: 2).

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