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Silkworms and Consorts in Nara Japan

Abstract

This article examines the role of the Chinese ritual calendar and continental technologies in the formation of early literary and ritual tropes of the Japanese islands. Special attention is given to a small cluster of legends involving imperial emissaries that are sent to call out women with whom rulers have become enamored. The text argues that these legends illustrate the influence of continental rites and legends related to weaving and sericulture on the formation of early tropes of kingship and courtly romance. Because these legends appear to have been rooted in Chinese rites in which silkworm goddesses were “called out” using imagery based upon the silkworm’s ability to “die” and be reborn, the text further argues that these legends may have been related to the development of purportedly “native” funerary practices during the period.

Keywords: Hata—Nara—*Nihon shoki*—ritual calendar—sericulture—weaving

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ALTHOUGH SCHOLARS of Japanese religion have long focused on the formation of the Buddhist tradition as the single most important religious development of the first decades of the seventh century, the adoption of the Chinese ritual calendar during this period heralded a shift in Japanese cultic practice that in many ways overshadowed the fledgling Buddhist tradition for decades if not centuries to come. As the Yamato court adopted the ritual practices and festivals of the Chinese ritual cycle, Chinese myths, legends, and cosmological visions came to pervade the basic means by which political, cultic and even natural events were organized and categorized. Few if any aspects of court life remained untouched by these changes in the decades that followed.¹

By the seventh century Chinese rites tended to fall on specific days that were closely correlated both with Chinese numerology (thus the pre-eminence of festivals on the first day of the year, the third day of the third month, the fifth day of the fifth month, and so on) as well as the agricultural cycle (thus festivals on the solar and lunar equinoxes, mid-autumn festival, and so on). By adopting the Chinese ritual calendar the Yamato court thus embraced an entire worldview that integrated political, ritual and even astronomical events into a single, coherent whole. As such this ritual program promised to harmonize relationships among the various elements of the cosmos even as it helped transform the hearts and minds of its participants.

On a more mundane level, however, rites associated with the production of manufactured goods such as silks and woven fabrics were also given fixed dates throughout the year. Thus women prayed for silkworms on the fifteenth day of the first month and skill in weaving on the seventh day of the seventh month. During the fourth month a variety of taboos related to silkworms were observed, while much of the tenth month was taken up with offerings of thanks to the silkworm goddess.² Other rites related to agriculture, metalworking and medicine were also ubiquitous throughout the year.

Although seldom discussed as such, the diffusion of continental ritual forms across the Japanese islands was also of immediate consequence for the proliferation of continental textual traditions and narratives. Not only did the

calendar provide new patterns for organizing cultic life, it also facilitated the diffusion of continental historical and poetic tropes that were closely connected with the ritual calendar. Thus court-sponsored historical narratives such as the *Nihon shoki* not only utilized the new chronicle genre, they also allowed for the construction of a new past that was conceived in large part in terms of continental norms and conceptions of kingship. Because much of the poetry of the age was also composed to commemorate occasions at court, the adoption of stock poetic allusions from continental literature also required extensive familiarity with the legends and practices associated with the Chinese ritual calendar.

In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that among the best sources we have for studying the introduction of weaving cults into the Japanese islands can be found in the poetry of the period, much of which was composed on occasions such as the *tanabata* festival marking the reunion of the Weaver Maiden and Cowherd deities on the seventh day of the seventh month. The corpus of *tanabata* poetry in the *Manyōshū* and *Kaifūsō*, two collections of poetry composed during the Nara period, is surprisingly large. Several such poems, including a well-known cycle of poems attributed to Kakinomoto Hitomaro, strongly suggest that the observance of the *tanabata* festival in the Japanese islands predated the Nara period (KOJIMA 1975, 2: 1120–1153, WATASE 1999, 30–49).

References to weaving maidens and immortality in the period's literature were by no means limited, however, to the poetry of the period; in both the Imperial chronicles and in local gazetteers we also find goddesses, shamanesses (*miko*), and female immortals repeatedly represented as weaving maidens. While these figures are of enormous interest in their own right, their narratives are especially significant for two further reasons. First, the use of continental tropes to represent female ancestors and deities within the Japanese islands represents a watershed moment in the reformulation of gender identities in the cultic life of the period. Second, given the fundamentally allusive nature of much of the literature of the period, these texts can also tell us much about the horizon of reception against which these deities developed.

The continued influence of pre-war nationalist paradigms has meant that until recently historians of Japanese religion have viewed cults and legends rooted in Chinese mythology as peripheral elements in the religion of the period. Unfortunately, scholars of Japanese literature have for similar reasons also long assumed that allusions to Chinese legends in the poetry of the period merely reflect the heavy dependence of Japanese intellectuals upon Chinese models for the composition of Chinese prose and verse.³

In what follows I propose to explore a small set of poems and legends that feature emissaries who prostrate themselves and crawl as they call out women with whom rulers have become enamored. Because the motifs of crawling and “calling out” depicted in these narratives appear to be related to rites of calling

to the spirits of the recently deceased, these legends offer a small glimpse into the means by which the myths and legends associated with the Chinese ritual calendar came to inform even the apparently “native” cultic practices and literature during the period. Although no one would mistake these texts for historical reality, their very constructed nature provides us with invaluable information concerning the means by which continental cults and practices associated with weaving and sericulture informed gender paradigms across the cultic and literary spectrum of Nara Japan.

Once we analyze the sources used in the construction of these legends, three salient features concerning the role of Chinese rites of sericulture during the period become apparent. First, these legends of crawling and “calling out,” and the poetry associated with them, amply illustrate the degree to which motifs drawn from Chinese legends of weaving and sericulture informed the literature of the period. Second, the immigrant kinship groups that transmitted the technologies associated with sericulture to the Japanese islands were also likely sources for the diffusion of such weaving cults and legends.⁴ Finally, the silkworm’s ability to “die” within a cocoon only to re-emerge as a moth capable of flight meant that rites of sericulture in Japan were associated not only with the acquisition of wealth, but also with attainment of life after death and immortality.

SECTION ONE: OF WEAVERS, WORMS, AND KINGS

Although the rites of the Chinese ritual calendar are frequently discussed in terms of the Confucian agenda of harmonizing relations among ruler and ruled, these rites were also, and perhaps primarily, designed to do real work. Balancing the yin and yang elements in the cosmos was necessary to ensure proper amounts of rainfall and abundant crops. The profusion of rites related to sericulture and weaving, similarly, reflected not only the importance of those activities for the court, but also the necessity of such rites for the successful production of silks and fabrics.

The adoption of the Chinese ritual calendar in Japan was thus inextricably linked with the development of technologies related to weaving and metalworking in the Japanese islands. The diffusion of these technologies was greatly facilitated by immigrant kinship groups from the Korean peninsula, who came to the Japanese islands in successive waves beginning in the early fourth century. The accompanying transformations that they engendered in terms of social organization and economic productivity increased the wealth of the Yamato court even as they allowed for the expansion of its sphere of influence. Immigration and cultural influences from China and the Korean peninsula thus helped make

possible the expansion of Yamato power and the subsequent formation of the Ritsuryō law codes that typified government during the Nara period.

One example of this process can be seen in the following legend recounting the formation of the Hata, one of the largest and most powerful kinship groups to have immigrated to the Japanese islands:

In the days of the Emperor who reigned at the Asakura Palace in Hatsuse, the members of the Hata family became dependent on other families unrelated to their original house. The Emperor, however, graciously favoring the Hata chieftain, Sake no Kimi, who served at the Imperial Court, was pleased to gather again all the scattered members of that family and place them under the control of Sake no Kimi, who with one hundred and eighty excellent workmen, presented taxes to the Imperial Court of fine silks, with which he filled the palace courtyard.... These taxed soft silks when worn are very pleasing to the skin, and so the family name Hata, or Hada, meaning "skin," originated. With these same silks they covered the hilt of the sacred sword when worshipping at the Shinto shrine, and that ancient custom still remains unchanged. Thus we see how the silk weaving industry was originated by the Hata family in Japan (SATŌ 1924, 39).

This legend, though doubtless apocryphal, highlights two central social and economic facts regarding the diffusion of sericulture and weaving rites in the Japanese islands. First, fabrics and silks were not simply one type of valued commodity among many. Rather, they were a central medium of exchange throughout the period. The degree to which silks and fabrics served as the lifeblood of both economic and administrative activity in pre-modern Japan can be seen in the tax codes and registers of the Nara and Heian periods, which consistently suggest that the vast majority of materials collected by the court as taxes came in the form of rice, fabrics and silks.⁵ Stipends to courtiers and officials were also paid predominantly in terms of fabrics. Thus throughout this period the production of silks and woven fabrics closely approximated the production of money itself.

Secondly, the introduction and diffusion of technologies related to weaving and sericulture was closely related to the immigration to the Japanese islands of kinship groups such as the Hata. This is suggested not only by the high degree of familiarity with continental modes of culture and technology that such groups possessed, but also by contemporaneous sources themselves, which frequently and explicitly refer to immigrant kinship groups in conjunction with the dissemination of weaving technologies at the court (TAKEBE 1985, 59–121).

One further element of enormous consequence for the development of rites and legends associated with weaving was the highly gendered division of

labor that accompanied the diffusion of sericulture. In Japan as elsewhere in Asia, only women operated the looms that made fabric. Women also appear to have been responsible for the extremely labor intensive practice of feeding mulberry leaves to the silkworms that produced silk. Women thus occupied a central position in the production of wealth for any given household.

Not surprisingly, these social and economic realities were reflected across a wide spectrum of myth and cultic practice. By the start of the Nara period the most common offerings to deities were woven items, weaving implements and weaving maidens. Within the Imperial chronicles, perhaps the best illustration of the degree to which weaving motifs penetrated religious discourse at court can be seen in the well-known Heavenly Grotto myth in the *Nihon shoki*. In this legend even the sun goddess and imperial ancestor Amaterasu is depicted in a ritual weaving chamber working at her loom prior to her death and resurrection (KOJIMA 1994, 1: 75–91).

The use of weaving and sericulture tropes was not limited, however, to accounts of the land's mythic origins; the Imperial chronicles were also at pains to portray rulers and their consorts in terms of Chinese sericulture rites. One notable example of this can be seen in the following legend recounting the founding of the Chisakobe kinship group:

Yūryaku 6.3.7. The Emperor wished to make the Empress and his consorts plant mulberry trees with their own hands in order to encourage sericulture. So he ordered Sugaru [Sugaru is a personal name] to gather silkworms (*ko*) throughout the land. Now Sugaru misunderstood and gathered babies (*wagako*), which he presented to the Emperor. The Emperor laughed greatly and gave the babies to Sugaru, saying, "You raise them." Sugaru thus raised the orphans by the wall of the palace. He was therefore given a title and made "Chisakobe no Muraji" (KOJIMA 1994, 2: 167).

This text appears to be directly modeled on Chinese practices first described in the *Rites of Chou* (Chinese: *Chou-li*, Japanese: *Shūrai*), which states that at the start of the third month the Empress herself was to seclude herself in a ritual enclosure for a period of days, during which time she would personally feed mulberry leaves to silkworms (HONDA 1980, 218). Such rites were being practiced in China even at the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki*; thus the *Chiu T'ang-shu*, a Chinese court history of the T'ang dynasty, states that even Empress Wu fed silkworms in this manner during the reign of her husband Kao-tsu (CHUNGHUA SHUJU 1975, 1: 75).

The above legend from the *Nihon shoki*, while no doubt apocryphal, thus clearly suggests that by the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki* in 720 the Nara court was portraying itself in terms of longstanding Chinese ritual

models. It further suggests that the court was well aware of the special association of Imperial consorts and even empresses with silkworms and sericulture within that ritual system. As such ritual associations came to inform even legends of courtship among rulers and their empresses and consorts, the tropes and legends from the Chinese ritual calendar came to pervade even the “native” poetry and legends of the period.

The fact that the above legend depicts both the formation of a service group such as the Chisakobe and the establishment of rites of sericulture also highlights a second aspect of the relationship between sericulture and the advent of the Chinese ritual calendar. Although here Sugaru is shown as a fool who does not understand ritual, it is almost certainly the case that the introduction of sericulture into the Japanese islands was closely related to the establishment of service groups such as the Chisakobe. References to the establishment of weaving service groups in the *Nihon shoki* suggest that they were in large part composed of immigrants from the Korean peninsula that would have been knowledgeable about continental practices regarding sericulture as well as weaving (TAKEBE 1985, 70–99). One hint that the Chisakobe were associated with the development of sericulture in the Japanese islands can be found in the *Shinsen shōjiroku*, a ninth-century genealogical compendium. The text states that Yūryaku later charged the Chisakobe with assembling members of the scattered Hata kinship group to whom we referred above (SAEKI 1962, 1: 307).

The introduction of sericulture and the formation of weaving service groups in turn produced enormous changes in ritual behavior in the Japanese islands because sericulture as it was conceived of in China included a broad array of Chinese rites and beliefs associated with silkworms. Evidence for this can be seen in another entry from the *Rites of Chou* that states that the Chou banned the “double cultivation” of silkworm cocoons during a single year (HONDA 1980, 62). The reasons for this interdiction are discussed in Kan Pao’s *Sou-shen chi*, a Chinese tale collection from the fifth century:

The Book of Silkworms says, “When the moon is in the position of great fire, then [fire] pervades its nature. The silkworm and the horse are of the same character.” In the *Rites of Chou* it is written that the Master of the Horse Stables “forbade the double cultivation of silkworms.” The note says, [within the same class] “Two things cannot predominate [at the same time]. The double cultivation of silkworms was forbidden because this would harm horses” (HUANG 1996, 481).

This rather remarkable text illustrates the degree to which technical knowledge concerning the raising of silkworms was implicated in broader cosmological and cultic systems. Here we find that the practice of double cultivation of

silkworms was conceived of in terms of astral cults and five phases (*wu-hsing*) thought. Such concerns were so established in China that they persisted for centuries after the Yamato court began to integrate such beliefs into the daily rhythms of life in the Japanese islands.

This broader cosmological framework is of central importance for understanding the cultic effects of the transmission of sericulture to the Japanese islands. Although, given modern prejudices, it is perhaps natural to view this process exclusively in terms of technology, the above text highlights the crucial point that the practice of sericulture during the period involved much more than knowledge of proper techniques for using land, cultivating mulberry trees, and raising silkworms. It also required knowledge of Chinese silkworm deities, rites, and legends associated with weaving and the relationship between silkworms and other elements of the cosmos.

This in turn suggests that the immigrant kinship groups that helped introduce sericulture to the Japanese islands may also have played a major role in introducing Chinese cultic practices and legends related to silkworms and weaving. One concrete indication of Hata participation in just such cults can be found in the Kokahi Shrine (Silkworm Breeding Shrine), a Hata cultic center in Yamashiro Province that housed a silkworm deity.⁶

POETRY, WEAVING, AND IMMORTALITY

As the above account in the *Sou-shen chi* suggests, silkworms were the object of considerable cultic attention in both China and Japan during the pre-modern period. As the source of silk and, by extension, prosperity, this is perhaps not surprising. Yet the life cycle of silkworms, exhibiting as it did a three-stage process of birth, “death” within the cocoon and “rebirth” as a moth, also presented a powerful metaphor for the acquisition of eternal life. One of the earliest indications of such associations in Japan can be found in an entry from the *Nihon shoki*:

A man from the eastern lands in the area of the Fuji river named Ōfube no Ōshi encouraged the people in the villages to worship an insect, saying “This is the god of the everlasting world [*tokoyo no kami*]. If you worship this god, it will bring you wealth and long life.” Shamans pretended to receive oracles saying “If [they] worship the *tokoyo no kami*, the poor will become wealthy and the old will return to youth.” They thus increasingly encouraged the people to throw away their household valuables, and line up sake, vegetables and the six domestic animals by the roadsides. They also had them cry out “The new wealth is coming!” People in the capital and the countryside took the *tokoyo* insect and installed it on sanctified

platforms. They sang and danced for wealth and threw away their treasures without obtaining any benefit. The loss and waste were extreme.

At this Hata no Miyatsuko no Kawakatsu from Kadono, hating to see the people so deluded, killed Ōfube no Ōshi. The shamans were frightened by this and ceased encouraging the cult. The people of the time thus made a song, singing:

“It’s a god, a god!” So came its fame resounding
 But Uzumasa
 Has struck down and punished it
 That god of the Everworld [*tokoyo*].⁷

This insect usually breeds on the *tachibana* (Japanese orange) and *hosoki* trees. It is over four inches in length and its thickness is about that of a thumb. It is green colored with black spots and in every way resembles a silkworm (KOJIMA 1994, 3: 93–95).

This passage is notable not only for the expectation that the god of immortality would appear in a form that “in every way resembles a silkworm,” but also for the fact that the lone description in the Imperial chronicles of a mass religious movement suggests a strong popular awareness of silkworm cults and deities. It would thus appear that one by-product of the introduction of sericulture into the Japanese islands was a powerful awareness of silkworm deities and a widespread linkage of the silkworm with popular aspirations for both prosperity and eternal life. This in turn suggests that even before the completion of the *Nihon shoki* in 720 the advent of continental material culture had already produced dramatic changes in the popular religious imagination of the day.

This linkage between sericulture and immortality may also be seen in the pervasive motif in the literature of the period of the female immortal who appears on earth in the form of a weaving maiden. One of the best known such figures was Kuwa Hime (literally: “Mulberry Maiden”), a female immortal who is repeatedly referenced in the poetry of the period. This maiden was said to have assumed the form of a mulberry branch floating in a mountain stream in Yoshino, only to be forced to marry a human male that had discovered the magic garment that allowed her to fly between heaven and earth. Because Kuwa Hime is said to have ultimately left her husband to return to heaven, the legend featured prominently in poetry expressing regret over lost love (SHIMODE 1986, 110–27, and KATATA 1991, 39–56).

One example of how motifs drawn from legends of figures such as Kuwa Hime came to pervade the poetic vocabulary of the period can be seen in the following poem attributed in the *Nihon shoki* to the ruler Nintoku. The poem

is set within the context of a legend in which Nintoku seeks to repair relations with his estranged chief consort, Iwa no Hime:

The Emperor launched on the river and betook himself to Yamashiro. Just then a mulberry branch floated by. The Emperor saw the mulberry branch and sang:

Vine-swarming
 Rock Princess Iwa no Hime
 Not indifferently
 Will hear of you
 Leafy mulberry tree:

You shouldn't go near them
 All those bending river bends
 But you round them every one

Leafy mulberry tree (KOJIMA 1994, 2: 49–51, CRANSTON 1993, 83).

This poem, which somewhat improbably posits a relationship between Iwa no Hime and a mulberry branch floating in a river, brings to mind the following poem from the *Manyōshū*, in which Kuwa Hime's benighted husband is said to recollect Kuwa Hime's first appearance on earth as a mulberry branch in a river at Yoshino:

If this evening
 A branch of wild mulberry
 Should come floating by,
 I've set no traps to catch it in,
 And it might get away (CRANSTON 1993, 497).

Given the thematic similarities between these two poems, it would appear either that a) the two poems were unrelated, in which case they would serve as an illustration of the widespread degree to which continental tropes concerning women and sericulture had penetrated the poetic imagination of the age, or b) the editors of the *Nihon shoki* consciously utilized a poem rooted in the Kuwa Hime legend cycle in order to evoke Nintoku's regret at his separation from his wife. If this is in fact the case, then the use of such imagery suggests that by the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki* the text's editors could be confident that the Kuwa Hime legend cycle would be well known to their readers. This is especially important because, unlike the above legend concerning Yūryaku's establishment of Chinese-based rites of sericulture, Nintoku's poem is based upon references to a female immortal that was a fixture of indigenous legends.

CRAWLING AND “CALLING OUT”

These allusions to female immortals in the text's depiction of Iwa no Hime are especially important for our purposes because of a series of poems and legends recounting episodes from Nintoku and Iwa no Hime's stormy relationship that feature the following rite involving Iwa no Hime and the Imperial envoy Kuchiko, a member of the Wani kinship group who prostrates himself as he “calls out” Iwa no Hime:

As Kuchiko sang his song, a great rain began to fall. Without trying to avoid the rain, he prostrated himself before the front door of the hall. The Empress [then] went out to the back door. He went and prostrated himself before the back door of the hall, and she went back out to the front. As he crawled back and forth and prostrated himself in the courtyard, the water came up to his waist. At the time, the Omi was wearing a red sash with a green garment. As the water reached the sash, the green all turned red.

Now Kuchiko's younger sister Kuchihime was in the service of the Empress. Kuchihime thus made a song, saying:

My lord and elder brother,
 Calling out (*mono mōsu*) in the palace
 At Tsutsuki in Yamashiro.
 Is on the verge of tears (KURANO 1958, 273–75).

This unusual legend again illustrates the degree to which the transformation in court ritual in the Suiko period was reflected in Imperial ancestral legends by the advent of the Nara period. Here Kuchiko's prostration before the Empress appears to be a direct reflection of the adoption of Chinese court ritual, which would have required this expression of reverence before an Empress. A more subtle suggestion of the influence of the new court decorum can also be found in the text's depiction of Kuchiko's attire; the envoy's green robes and red sash correspond precisely with the prescribed ritual garb for *ommyōdō* ritualists at both the T'ang and Nara courts.⁸ Details such as these thus suggest that this legend was composed after the penetration of the ritual practices and legends associated with the Chinese calendar into the Japanese islands.

Other elements of Kuchiko's behavior, however, cannot be accounted for simply in terms of continental forms of court etiquette. The text's assertion that Kuchiko actually crawled back and forth in Iwa no Hime's courtyard, for instance, appears unrelated to the court decorum adopted by Suiko. Such crawling resonates strongly, however, with indigenous funerary practices before the body or tomb of a recently deceased figure. Shinkawa suggests, therefore, that

Kuchiko's actions may also have been related to ritual gestures associated with death and resurrection (SHINKAWA 1999, 33).

Several clues as to how Kuchiko's crawling might have been related to early death rituals can be seen in the legend of the death and resurrection of yet another Wani ancestor, the prince Yamato Takeru. Because the *Nihon shoki* version of this legend shows the prince achieving resurrection in terms closely resembling legends of Chinese immortals, this legend is often cited as a prime example of Taoist influences in early Japanese religion. Of particular note, however, is the *Kojiki's* account of the reaction of Yamato Takeru's family to the prince's death:

Thereupon his consorts who lived in Yamato, and all his children, came down and made him a tomb. Crawling around in the muddy paddies, they cried and sang:

In the sticky fields
 In among the stalks of rice,
 Among the rice stalks,
 We crawl around and around
 Creepers of wild yam...

These four songs were all sung at his funeral. Thus even unto today they sing these songs at an Emperor's funeral (CRANSTON 1993, 24–25).

This text is notable not only for its depiction of Yamato Takeru's descendants crawling before his tomb but also for its assertion that the accompanying songs calling back the spirit of the deceased were an established part of Imperial funerary rites by the early Nara period. Shinkawa notes that one of the best known examples of this practice can be found in the *Nihon shoki* account of the origins of death, wherein the deity Izanagi crawls about the head and feet of his deceased wife Izanami before he undertakes to bring her back from the underworld (SHINKAWA 1999, 32–33).

When it was time for the fire god Kagutsuchi to be born, his mother Izanami was burned and died. Izanagi no Mikoto said bitterly: “[I have] exchanged my dearest love for just one child!” He then crawled about at her head and feet, wailing and shedding tears (KOJIMA 1994, 1: 43).

When read against legends such as these, the legend of Kuchiko's crawling about the Empress' courtyard in *ommyōdō* ritual garb in order to “call out” the Empress Iwa no Hime, suggests the intriguing possibility that ritual/literary tropes for calling to the spirits of the dead may have come to influence even the

tales of courtship between rulers and consorts that dot the pages of the Imperial chronicles.

SECTION TWO: SILKWORMS, WEAVERS, AND “CALLING OUT”

Fortunately, several clues as to the nature and role of such tropes can be seen in two further legends from the Imperial chronicles that feature the motif of a ritualist/envoy seeking to “call out” an Imperial consort. The most developed of these concerns the efforts of the Imperial envoy Nakatomi no Ikatsu, who is sent by the ruler Ingyō to summon Sotōri Iratsume (Otohime), the sister of Ingyō’s chief consort. Otohime, fearful of her sister’s jealousy, is at first reluctant to appear before the ruler:

Hereupon Ikatsu no Omi, having received his orders, retired. Hiding provisions in his clothing, he went to Sakata and prostrated himself in Otohime’s courtyard, saying “By command of the Emperor, I call you.” Otohime answered “How could I not reverentially receive the command of the Emperor? I but wish to not harm the feelings of the Empress. [Therefore] even though it cost me my life, I will not go back [to the Emperor].

At this Ikatsu no Omi replied “Your servant has already received an Imperial command—I must bring you back. If you do not come, I will surely be judged to be guilty [of negligence]. Rather than returning and being executed, I would rather die prostrate in this courtyard.” At this he then lay prostrate in the courtyard for seven days, and though they offered him food and drink, he did not partake. [Instead] he secretly ate from the provisions that he had concealed.

At this Otohime thought “Due to the Empress’ jealousy I have already disobeyed the Emperor’s command, and my lord, who is a faithful minister, will die. This too will be my fault.” She therefore decided to go back with Ikatsu [...] (KOJIMA 1994, 2: 115–17).

This legend, involving as it does an Imperial envoy prostrating himself in a court yard in order to call out an imperial consort, closely resembles the aforementioned legend in which the envoy Kuchiko calls out of the Empress Iwa no Hime.⁹ Further thematic similarities can be seen elsewhere within the legend cycle of Ingyō and Otohime/Sotōri’s courtship, where we again find what appear to be references to Chinese rites and practices related to sericulture. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Nihon shoki* account of the legend:

In the eighth year, spring, the second month, he [the Emperor] went to Fujiwara and secretly observed the demeanor of Lady Sotōri. That evening

Lady Sotōri was alone, yearning for the Emperor. Unaware that the Emperor had come, she composed a song, saying:

Tonight is the night
 My young love will come to me:
 Little bamboo crab
 Spider's antics make it clear,
 Oh, very clear tonight!

The Emperor was moved on hearing this song, and composed a song of his own:

Fine-patterned
 Sashes of brocade undone,
 Lying at our ease,
 Many times we have not slept—
 Only for a single night (CRANSTON 1993, 85).

Although the editors of the *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* edition of the *Nihon shoki* gloss Sotōri Itatsume's poem as referring somewhat incongruously to a spider web on an umbrella, Hirabayashi Akihito has suggested that the text of Sotōri's poem refers to a common divination practice performed on the evening of the *tanabata* festival (HIRABAYASHI 1998, 150–55). This practice is described in the *Ching-ch'u sui-shih chi*, a late sixth-century text detailing the popular ritual calendar of Southern China during the period:

On this evening, housewives tie colored threads [with which] they thread needles with seven holes, some of which are made of gold, silver or precious stones. They place fruits in the courtyard and pray for skill [in weaving]. They are happy if a spider weaves a web on the fruit, which they interpret as an (auspicious) sign (MORIYA 1931, 155).

Because the *Ching-ch'u sui-shih chi* was composed only slightly before the Yamato court adopted the Chinese ritual calendar, it is highly likely that the Nara court was aware of such rites. Further evidence for this can be seen in physical evidence from the period; sets of just such colored balls of yarn and ritual needles that have been preserved in the Shōsōin storehouse in Nara demonstrate that such rites were performed in Japan as well as in China (HIRABAYASHI 1998, 154).

Several further allusions to *tanabata* motifs centering on the once-annual meeting of the Weaver Maiden and Cowherd can be found within other poems from the Otohime/Sotōri poem cycle. Thus although we are told in the text that

Otohime is unaware that Ingyō is near, within the poem she declares that “This is the night my husband will come.” Ingyō’s reference to a meeting of lovers for “but one night only” is also inexplicable outside of the context of the *tanabata* rites celebrating the annual meeting of the Weaver and Cowherd for a single night. All of this thus again highlights the importance of Chinese weaving cults and myths for the text’s horizon of reception; once again the editors of the *Nihon shoki* appear to be quoting from a widely known Chinese tradition of ritual and legend in order to convey the combination of both expectation and sorrow that are felt by an Imperial ancestor and his newly acquired consort.

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence that this legend cycle was conceived in terms related to sericulture and weaving cults, however, can be found in the following poem in which Iwa no Hime somewhat remarkably explicitly refers to both herself and her rival as silkworms:

Summer crawlers,
Silkworms that make double clothes:
Wearing two layers,
Sleeping snug and bundled up—
Oh, no, that can’t be right! (CRANSTON 1993, 80).

Although this legend is usually glossed as a protest against Nintoku’s keeping two lovers, there can be no doubt that rites and practices associated with sericulture were essential background elements in its composition. One important clue as to what such elements might have been may be found in the text’s allusion to the insect “wearing double garments.” Assuming that this indicates a silkworm in its cocoon, the text’s protest of “double garments” would suggest some connection with the Chinese interdiction of the double cultivation of silkworms that was cited above.¹⁰

These references, when taken together, thus suggest that the editors of the *Nihon shoki* deliberately highlighted Chinese tropes derived from weaving and sericulture as they set down a cluster of legends centered upon the “calling out” of Imperial consorts. Although the limited scope and nature of these sources allows for few definitive conclusions, the familiarity with Chinese cultic practices demonstrated by these allusions strongly suggests that the adoption of the Chinese ritual calendar had by the Nara period given rise to a broader poetic and ritual vocabulary that informed even the “native” legends and rites of the period.

NURINOMI AND THE “INSECT OF THE THREE TRANSFORMATIONS”

Fortunately, much more solid evidence concerning the nature and extent of the court’s interest in Chinese silkworm cults can be found in the conclusion to the

Kojiki account of the Wani ancestor Kuchiko's attempt to "call out" the Empress Iwa no Hime from the home of one Nurinomi, an immigrant woman from the Korean peninsula who raises silkworms:

Then Kuchiko no Omi, his younger sister Kuchi Hime and Nurinomi discussed [the situation] all three [together], and sent word to the Emperor saying "The reason for the Empress' journey is [to be found] in some insects that Nurinomi is rearing. These marvelous insects at one time are crawling insects, at one time are cocoons, and one time become (like) flying birds— [they are] marvelous insects of three transformations and colors. She has come here simply to see these insects. She has no strange intentions." When they had made this report, the Emperor said "If that is the case, then I wish to go and see these [insects], as I think they [must be] strange and marvelous" (KURANO 1958, 275).

Set in the Tsutsuki district of Yamashiro province, a stronghold of both the Wani and the Hata kinship groups, this text displays several by now familiar literary tropes rooted in continental sericulture rites. The image of an immigrant from the Korean peninsula introducing members of the court to the process of raising silkworms appears emblematic of the broader process by which sericulture came to be introduced into the Japanese islands.

More concretely, however, this passage also suggests how and why Chinese silkworm cults came to be related to the legends of "calling out" that we saw above. Here the text explicitly pairs the motif of the Wani ancestor "calling out" an empress with an image of an empress shut in an enclosure watching silkworms. Since we have already seen that the Nara court was keenly aware of Chinese court rituals that required the empress to perform just this role, this text is almost certainly yet another instance of the Nara court representing itself and its ancestors on the basis of Chinese ritual paradigms related to sericulture.

Even more important than the content of the legend, however, is the textual sources upon which it is based; this legend demonstrates an awareness on the part of the Nara court of popular Chinese silkworm cults that cannot be traced to classical poetic sources. Here Nurinomi is not depicted in the vocabulary of the *Rites of Chou*, "encouraging the silk industry," rather, she is extolling the silkworm's strange and wondrous powers to die and then be reborn. Especially notable in this regard is Nurinomi's use of the phrase "transformations in three colors" in reference to the silkworm. This phrase appears closely related to a passage from the *Po-wu chih*, a third century Chinese gazetteer that also refers to the silkworm as the insect of "three transformations" (T'ANG 1980, 45 and MORIYA 1931, 52). Thus, although the above legend may have little basis as historical fact, it nonetheless strongly suggests that the editors of the *Nihon shoki*

were familiar with popular conceptions of silkworms in China. If we assume that such allusions formed part of a broader conceptual vocabulary familiar to the text's readers, then it would appear that the miraculous ability of the silkworms to "die" within cocoons only to be reborn was a cause for wonder not only among millennial movements in the countryside, but also among the literate members of the court.

Crucially, this motif of the silkworm as the insect of "three transformations," in turn, was enshrined prominently in the popular Chinese ritual calendar on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year. This date marked the ritual end of the New Year's period, when the spirits of the dead were thought to be capable of returning to visit the living. Known as the first of the "three origins" it was also thought to mark a major turning point from which events of the year were thought to flow. As a result, on this day, as throughout the New Year's period, rites of divination for the following year were performed along with rites for the spirits of ancestors and other household deities (NAKAMURA 1993, 49–65).

Because the fifteenth day of the first month of the year also marked the advent of the first full moon of the year, this date was also closely associated with the lunar cult and women. In the midst of this confluence of rites of gender, divination and spirit worship was a series of rites that were designed to call out the spirits of female deities associated with silkworms. According to the *Ching-ch'u sui-shih chi*, these began during the day with a rite calling out mice, which were perceived to be the enemy of the "silkworm which ages three times." (MORIYA 1931, 48).

Perhaps even more importantly, these rites were followed with a further set of rites that were related to sericulture. Just as Iwa no Hime and Sotōri Iratsuhime were "called out" by Nakatomi and Wani ancestors dressed in T'ang ritual garb, popular Chinese cultic practices on the evening of the fifteenth day of the first month centered upon the "calling out" of the spirit of a female silkworm goddess:

On this evening they welcome Tzu-ku, and divine [the amount of] their future silks and other affairs. According to Lui Ching-shu's *Yi-yuan*, Tzu-ku was originally somebody's concubine. The first wife was jealous of her. On the fifteenth day of the first month, she died from grief and humiliation. For this reason people make images of her and receive her, saying a spell.... If [the doll] becomes heavy, then the goddess has come (MORIYA 1931, 48).

In light of the fact that the *Ching-ch'u sui-shih chi* was composed only slightly before the Yamato court adopted the Chinese ritual calendar, it is highly likely that by the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki* rites associated

with sericulture that were performed on one of the most important days in the yearly ritual cycle would have been known in the Japanese islands. On these days women across China not only performed rites of divination designed to maximize the number of silkworms “that age three times,” they also “called out” of an enclosure the spirit of a silkworm goddess. By the Nara period, such motifs were part of the basic conceptual vocabulary in terms of which past rulers such as Yūryaku and Ingyō as well as their consorts were represented in the newly minted historical chronicles of the court.

None of this is to say that figures such as Iwa no Hime or Nurinomi exercised great influence over the development of the religious institutions of Nara Japan. Rather, these and other such figures are of interest for what they reveal about the sources of the tropes of kingship and courtship that were constructed during the period. By the advent of the Nara period, the trope of the weaver maiden/consort feeding mulberry leaves to the “insect of three transformations” had penetrated not only the derivative Chinese-style poetry of court intellectuals, but also verse and narratives recording local legends and courtly romances from a past that never was. As the mysterious silkworm fascinated not only silk-clad courtiers but also the desperate followers of millennial movements, sericulture rites and tropes from the continent became fixtures in the conceptual universe that shaped the pillars of Nara Japan.

CONCLUSION

The adoption of the Chinese ritual calendar was part of a broader cultural and political transformation which saw not only the expansion of the power of rulers of the Yamato plain, but also a transformation in the means by which that power was understood and represented. Among the most important elements allowing for the expansion of the wealth and power of these rulers was the introduction of manufacturing technologies from the continent. These technologies, central to political and economic life in both China and the Japanese islands, were also heavily represented in the rites and legends associated with the Chinese calendar. As a result, many of the cultic practices adopted by the Yamato court were built not only upon conceptions of yin and yang, and so on, but also upon what at the time was considered best practice in the crafts and industries that made courtly life possible. Thus as the Yamato court adopted the Chinese ritual calendar it not only promoted new modes of governance, it also furthered the ritual program associated with the crafts and industries that formed a major part of its economic foundation.

Among the many by-products of this confluence of influences in ritual, craft and poetry was a transformation in the means by which women were represented by both poets and chroniclers of the age. Thus throughout Imperial texts

as well as the poetry of the age we find repeated references to women as weaving maidens, immortals, or even, as we have seen above, as mulberry branches and silkworms. One further by-product of this process was also a small number of legends dealing with envoys sent to “call out” Imperial consorts and Empresses from ritual enclosures where they claimed, among other things, to be tending silkworms.

These legends of “calling out” are immediately relevant to the question of how continental motifs of immortality and resurrection came to occupy such a large place in the literature of the period. Although it would be premature to draw firm conclusions based on the content of such a small sampling of texts, these poems and legends suggest that the horizon of reception for the poems and legends of the age may have been substantially influenced by the diffusion of sericulture and the adoption of the Chinese ritual calendar. Thus even as the metaphor of the silkworm undergoing three transformations resonated among members of the mass millennial cult of Ōfube no Ōshi, so too did figures such as Kuwa Hime and Tzu-ku come to haunt the poetic and mythic vocabulary of the Nara court. Thus did “native” rites and legends involving consorts, mulberry maidens and even silkworm messiahs come to pervade the Land of Eight Islands.

NOTES

1. For the Chinese ritual calendar, see NAKAMURA 1993. For the ritual calendar of the Nara court, see MIYAKE 1995. In referring to adoption of the rites and practices of the “Chinese” ritual calendar, I am merely referring to their place of ultimate origins. As will become apparent in what follows, I ascribe a central role in this process to kinship groups that traced their origins to the Korean peninsula.

2. For the development of such practices, see KUHN, 1984: 213–45. For weaving cults in Japan, see HIRABAYASHI 1998).

3 This line has been repeatedly adopted by Shimode Sekiyo, one of the first scholars to discuss the role of Taoism in early Japan [SHIMODE 1986 and SHIMODE 1997]. On the literary front, much the same line is taken in KOJIMA 1975. For an excellent discussion of current debates concerning the role of Taoism in Japan, see KOHN 1995, 389–412. As Kohn notes, legends of immortals and resurrection, etc., were not the exclusive provenance of the Taoist tradition. My concern here, therefore, is not so much with the Taoist tradition as with religious practices and beliefs that could be found across the Chinese religious spectrum during the period.

4. These texts were first identified as a set in SHINKAWA 1999, 23–45. The term “immigrant” is of course socially constructed. Here I use the term “immigrant kinship group” to refer to any kinship that claimed as a founding ancestor a person or god from across the sea.

5. This is suggested most famously in the fourth article of the Taika edicts [*Nihon shoki*, Taika 2.1, KOJIMA 1994, 3: 131–33]. Although the historicity of the Taika reforms is greatly open to question, by the advent of the Nara period there is little doubt that woven products

were a mainstay of both taxation and salaries at court. TORAO Toshiya (1993, 432) states that during the period “Produce taxes were paid in kind on goods produced locally and required by the central government. These were mainly textiles, especially silk and hemp cloth, but also included dyes, lacquer, paper, and salt.

6. This shrine later became a center of the oshira silkworm cult. For rites and legends associated with this most unusual silkworm cult, see KONNO 1956.

7. The translation of the song is from Edwin CRANSTON’s superb anthology (1993, 120).

8. SHINKAWA (1999, 32) also notes that the Wani appear to have been closely connected with the performance of *ommyōdō* rites for the Nara court.

9. In this regard SHINKAWA (1999, 29) notes that Kuchiko was an ancestor of the Wani kinship group. Because Ikatsu and Otohime are shown later in the legend stopping at the residences of other Wani ancestors at the center of the Wani’s main base, he therefore suggests that the Wani may have played an important role in the construction of this legend.

10. CRANSTON notes: “Why the cocoon should be considered “double-layered” is not clear; it has been suggested that the reference is to silkworms that spin cocoons twice that is, go through two generations) in a season. The application of the jo to the human situation must envisage the happy husband enjoying the warmth of two bedmates at once (CRANSTON 1993, 80).

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