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Tanaka Hidemichi

The History of Japan

Really, what is so great about it?



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www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

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00040 Ariccia (RM)
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Introduction

Let me first talk about my personal experience. This will explain why I, a scholar specializing in Western culture, have been studying the history of Japan for more than twenty years and have finally written this book.

I was born during the War and was brought up in the midst of the post-war recovery years. I spent my childhood in Japan that was occupied by US Forces, and was obliged to accept an education which taught us that Japan in the past was feudalistic and poor, a history that deserved to be expunged. I was taught that that the history of Japan of the past was disgusting. I could not help but long for and greatly admire foreign countries. This was the experience shared by many young people at that time.

After entering university, I took to writing novels in the style of American literature of those days, which is a common inclination among literature-loving youths. Then I began to study French literature, only to feel discouraged soon after. However hard one may try to master Western languages, one can hardly compete with native speakers. Though I was in the department of French literature at Tokyo University, I quit and transferred to the department of aesthetics and art history. I thought that I could appreciate art works as much as any foreign researcher.

Fortunately, I passed the examination as part of applying for a scholarship grant from the French government, then studied at the University of Strasbourg for four years and wrote a doctoral thesis. After going through very strict accreditation, I was able to graduate *summa cum laude*.

With this achievement, feeling that I have finished my study of French culture and, upon the recommendation of my advisor, this time I applied to a scholarship sponsored by the Italian government, which was granted, whereupon I moved to Italy to study. In Italy, I was utterly impressed by the depth and refinement of Western culture and

absorbed in studying it. I focused my study on Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and learned the language. As a result, I was devoted to the study of “Renaissance” culture and after I had acquired a teaching position at Tohoku University, I commuted between Japan and Italy. I made new discoveries and often presented them to academic society. When the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City was restored, I had a chance to study it up close from the footing and again I wrote a thesis on the subject. The experience of witnessing with my own eyes the great works of Western civilization was a little overwhelming.

Then, when I went to Florence, I had a chance to meet Master Fosco Maraini (1912–2004) through an introduction by a friend of mine. He is a famed anthropologist. Old as he was then, he was deeply interested in Asia. He had been to Japan when he was young.

Master Maraini told me, in the study of his home near Michelangelo Hill, the following:

I was tremendously shocked by Japan. Japan awoke me. There was a country with an excellent culture, without the reliance on Western Christianity nor the study of Western classics. Wherever I looked, I was able to meet people with consistent morality, sense of justice and mental maturity. Through this encounter, I came to learn that Western Christianity is not a supreme religion, but a relative and historical being. Any religion or any philosophy is nothing more than an attempt to explain human existence, time, death and evil. Although the Japanese people do not outwardly inform Westerners of their excellent thinking by means of books, visiting Japan myself, I found that they are living it. The very existence of such a country, Japan, poses a challenge to the West. Japan is a country much greater than the geographical position it occupies on a world map.

After reflection, Master Maraini’s words awakened me and I realized, with some regret, that Japanese culture is a matured civilization in its own way, different from Western culture. It was a shame to have come to change my mind after being told how great Japan is by a foreign scholar. It was then that I realized for the first time in my life that I am a Japanese in the true sense of the word. At the same time, I felt irritated at the fact that no Japanese scholar has confidently stated what Japanese culture is like.

Japan—seemingly understood and yet not quite understood—I will look over Japan once again. After returning from Italy, my consideration of the national history of Japan was underway.

I decided to start studying Japanese culture. I thought it a rare opportunity for a Japanese scholar with knowledge of foreign cultures to understand the high quality of Japanese culture and the uniqueness of Japanese history through a comparison between Japan and foreign countries, and, thus, contribute to the study of my own country's history. After moving to Akita International University, I taught my class in English while I continued studying the culture of Japan and the Orient. Fortunately, I had appreciated many Japanese works of art, and my study began on the basis of valuable assets. At the same time, it meant sweeping away the education I had received during the years after the War.

When I talk about Japan's national history, I strongly feel three forces.

First is the force of tradition. It may be called the power of community, which will never be eliminated by whatever political or military powers exist at the time. More directly, it is the existence of the Emperor. It's a rock-solid fact that the emperor system runs through one hundred and twenty-five generations.

Such a force of tradition exists not only in politics, but also in the domain of economics. When world standards are applied, there are many Japanese companies with long histories that meet these standards. In Europe and America, there is a society called *Les Hénokiens*, which is an economic association composed of old firms with over two hundred years' since their founding. There are many Japanese firms that are members, which proves the power of Japanese old firms. In fact, the oldest firm in the world, established in 574, is in Japan. It is only Japan, out of the entire world, that has more than fifteen-thousand old firms that have over one hundred years of history since their establishment.

Moreover, each firm has its own role in society. Not only firms, but also workers of each profession compose a sharing society. It is not a class-based society, but a sharing society.

The second force is a passion for beauty. Japanese art, literature, theater and music are all excellent in their own unique ways, which are different from their foreign counterparts. When you are in a country that built its buildings with stone, you may be exceedingly overwhelmed by the fortitude and grandness of stone buildings. But if you return to Japan, you may notice that Japanese shrines and temples built of wood are breathtakingly beautiful, in perfect harmony with the surrounding trees and woods. And in them are housed old altars and Buddhist images.

It's no exaggeration to say that in daily life many Japanese are poets, singers and designers. We can hardly see in other countries the like of the traditional culture of WAKA (Japanese poetry), HAIKU, flower arrangement and calligraphy, and accomplishments ranging from YOKYOKU (Noh songs) to Karaoke singing. And these are enjoyed by a great many people, compared with the only limited number of enthusiasts in other countries.

The third force is religion. Though they are unconscious of it, the Japanese are the most religious nation on earth.

Japanese people who come home from overseas trips notice while taking a walk in the neighborhood that there are many shrines and temples. They far outnumber the ubiquitous convenience stores. All across Japan, there are about eighty thousand shrines and as many temples, amounting to the total of one hundred and sixty thousand. On the other hand, the number of convenience stores is roughly fifty thousand. We have an impression that there are many churches and temples in European and Islamic countries. But actually, Japan also abounds in shrines and temples.

Why, then, do two the religions of Shinto and Buddhism coexist? In other countries, if two religions meet, they always fight against each other. We hear nothing of such conflicts over religious faiths in Japan. You may wonder why. In the first place, why are there almost the same number of shrines and temples representing each religion? Usually, if a person is religious, he or she holds one religious faith—however, Japanese people often worship with both religions in mind. This is called an integration of Shinto and Buddhism, which is seen in no other country of the world.

This integration of Shinto and Buddhism may sound unfamiliar to many people. The Buddhists talk of Buddhism and the Shinto faithful speak of Shinto. But nobody can tell us how they can coexist. That is because these two kinds of religion complement each other, rather than stand independently.

Both religions, Shinto as a communal religion among the Japanese and Buddhism as a personal faith, share roles in Japanese life. Japanese people should be aware of the fact that the two religions complement each other to become a “national religion”. This explains why there are so many shrines and temples. The first person who recognized this principle was Prince Shotoku. It is at shrines that people worship as a

community and temples are for individual worship. People worship ancestors and nature enshrined in shrines, while folks confess their personal worries and funeral services are performed in temples. Not a few people mix them up, but the principle rule is as I have just explained. That's how temples and shrines coexist.

In other words, Japanese people's spirits are stable because of the three forces in the forms of respect for traditional values, attention to aesthetic values and devotion to religion. And those forces on the bases of society, politics and economy enable us Japanese to live in the world as a nation.

This thinking is quite different from a historical view based on economics such as typical of Marxists. The economic view of history regards human actions as derived from egoism based on material lusts regulated by tangible objects. Even Adam Smith, supposedly the first economist, thought like that. This may be natural thinking, to Westerners who believe that no one can live without struggling for survival. However, that is a secondary matter in Japan, which is originally gifted with a natural environment where human beings can live without excessive competition. It is only when individuals compete with each other that 'material lust' or 'egoism' is taken into account. In the mutual community, they are to be held back.

At present, in the academic world of history, only a very few scholars plainly mention the Marxist historical view. Instead, they intently probe into individual historical facts in detail in the name of positivism, rummaging through historical sources and documents. Such shredding of history is the ultimate destination of Marxism. Hair-splitting history may account for a discrete view of history, but it cannot be an essential view of history. It is important to ask what significance the specific fact has in the total context of history and what value there is in it. On the other hand, such a near-sighted historical view lacks grander perspective.

In this book, I try to narrate the tales of Japanese history on the basis of values of humanity in the global perspective as much as I can, free from a Marxist historical view, historical view based on economics, or a Western-centered or China-centered historical view. It is the history of the country, national history, which highly regards the tangible legacy as well as written historical sources and puts more emphasis on culture than on economics.

I say the "national history," instead of the "history of Japan". But I

do not mean to agitate for nationalism here. At present, we call our country's history Japanese history. But it was in the 7th or 8th century that the word "Japan" was introduced. Before that, it was the country of YAMATO—China called our country Wa-koku. In this context, Japanese history refers to history from around the 7th or 8th century onward.

Moreover, Japanese history implies history seen objectively from abroad. It lacks identity of our own country's history. Consequently, most "Japanese history" we now see can be said to be the history of a ruined country. There, it is taken for granted that history can be written apart from the standpoint of their own country. However, as long as a Japanese author writes history, unless he or she has lived abroad for a very long time and the identity has been shifted to foreign countries, the author basically cannot write a 'history of Japan'. There cannot be history of a country without a concept of a country or national identity. Many Japanese historians and publishers of history books seem to have a strange preconception. Any country, when it discusses its own history, refers to it as a 'national history'. When historians write a history of the world, their focus tends to be on their own country. If the author is Toynbee (Arnold Joseph, 1889–1975), his 'world history' centers on England, and if McNeill (William Hardy, 1917~, Canadian, Professor Emeritus, University of Chicago) writes, his history centers on America. A historian's globalist vision is nothing more than an illusion. There is no such thing as a world citizen. History is a story strictly based on the position of one's country.

Now, let us begin the story of the national history of Japan. I would like to tell what is really so great about the history of Japan—with its sulfured silver-like charms.

Style	Archaism (Period of the Quicken- ing)	Classicism (Classical period)	Mannerism (Stylistic Period)	Baroque (Period of active movements)
Age (Period)	7th century (Asuka Period)	End of 7th to 8th centuries (Hakuho Period, Tenpyo Period) (Nara Period)	9th to 11th centu- ries (Jokan Period, Fuji- wara Period) (Heian Period)	12th to early 14th centuries (End of Heian to Kamakura Periods)

Characteristics	Frontal Simplicity Archaic smile Crudity Tactile impression value	Noble simplicity and quiet greatness Linear, planar Absolute lucidity (Sculptural) Tactile impres- sion value and circumference Circle, square Moderateness Idealistic	Imitation of Classici- sm Refinement Snake-like human body Imaginative anti-naturalism Melancholy Intellectual surplus Sensuality	Active movements Overly curvaceous Ellipse Contrast Picturesque Depth Relative lucidity Visual, spatial sha- dowing Realism Popularity
Major works	Kudara Kannon Zo (Hohryu-ji) Shitenno Zo (Hoh- ryu-ji Central Hall) Guze Kannon Zo (Hohryu-ji Dream Hall) Shaka Sanzon (Hohryu-ji Central Hall) Miroku-Bosatsu (Chugu-ji) Miroku-Bosatsu, (Kohryu-ji) <i>Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters)</i> <i>Fudoki (Records of Climate)</i> , and others.	Shitenno (Toma-ji) Mural of Hohryu-ji Central Hall Sculptures of Hoh- ryu-ji Five-storied Pagoda Judai-deshi, Hachi- bu-shu (Kofuku-ji) Fukukenjaku Kan- non, Nikko-Gekko Bosatsu (Todai-ji Museum) Shitenno (Kaidan-do Hall) Junijinsho (Shinya- kushi-ji) Ganjin (Toshodai-ji) <i>Manyoshu (Col- lection of the Ten Thousand Leaves)</i> <i>Kaifuso (Anthology of Chinese Poems)</i> and others	Shiten-myoo, Fudo-myoo, Tai- shakuten, Bonten, Go Bosatsu (To-ji) Nyoirin Kannon (Kanshin-ji) Shitenno (Kofuku-ji North Circular Hall) Shaka Kinkan Shu- tsugen Zu (Kyoto National Museum) Jocho= Amida Nyoo- rai Zo, Unchu Kuyo Bosatsu (Byodo-in Temple) <i>Kokinwakashu (Collection of An- cient and Modern Poems)</i> <i>Makura no Soshi (The Pillow Book)</i> <i>Genji Mongatari (The Tale of Genji)</i> and others	Ban Dainagon Emaki Shigi-san Engi Emaki Unkei=Doji Zo (Kongobu-ji), Bishamonten (Ganryojo-in), Muchaku Seshin Zo (Kofuku-ji) Jyokei=Kongorikishi Agyo Un- gyo, Junijinsho (Kofuku-ji) Tankei= Nijuhachi- bushu Fujin, Raijin (Myo- ho-in Main Hall) Kosho=Kuya Shonin (Rokuharamitsu-ji) <i>Jigoku Soshi (Book of Hell)</i> <i>Heiji Monogatari Ekotoba (Pictorial Scroll of the Tale of Heiji)</i> <i>Heike Monogatari (The Tale of Heike)</i> <i>Hojoki (Essays from Small Square Hut)</i> <i>Tsurezuregusa (Es- says Written as Ti- me Passes by Lei- surely)</i> , etc.

The history of Japan commences in myths

The Age of the *kami-gami**

The beginning of the Japanese mythology

The oldest history books in Japan are *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*) and *Nihon Shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*). (These two books together are referred to as the *Ki Ki*.) Though what is written in them somewhat differs, they share a common characteristic—both of them start from mythological legends, and these myths are intertwined with history.

And speaking of myths, Greek mythology is well known. Greek mythology depicts the intercourse between two worlds, one of the deities and the other of the humans. In addition, the *Ki Ki* and Greek mythology share similarity in that both writings describe the “origin” of a nation, for the Japanese and Greek peoples, respectively. Thus, the world of Japanese myths is more closely linked to that of Greek mythology than that of the Old Testament of Christianity. Theirs are not the world based on monotheism, but based on polytheism.

Mythological legends depicted in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* cover tales of the world of *kami-gami*, in a historical sequence, from the birth of a nation through *kami*’ descending to earth, which is described as “Tenson Korin” (Heavenly Offsprings Descending on Earth) and to the enthronement of the first Emperor, Jinmu, and the unification of the nation by subsequent Emperors, in direct connection with historical facts.

Needless to say, Japanese myths are not by themselves historical facts. Although they may not be factually accurate, they are indeed

* There are many deities or spirits in Japanese mythology and the Japanese concept of “*kami*” is completely different from that of a “God” as defined by Judeo-Christians. Thus, “*kami*” or deity will be referred to in this book. “*Kami-gami*” means many *kami* or deities.”

ancient far-away memories of the Japanese people, images born out of vague memories together with their prayers and yearnings, lively transcribed. The Japanese myths eloquently show the spirit of the Japanese people, thus leading to the history of the Japanese people in its spiritual form.

Totally humane *kami-gami* active in Japanese mythology

Many mythologies throughout the world begin with the creation of heaven and earth. Japanese mythology is no exception. Even modern science can only offer a hypothesis to explain how and when the Universe was born. For that matter, the theory of the origin of the world really belongs within the realm of the imagination.

In Japanese mythology, first there is the appearance of three pillars of *kami* at Takamagahara (the Plain of High Heaven). *Kami* are counted by the pillar, for originally, *kami* were thought to reside in trees. It is written that at that time the earth was an oily substance floating on the water like jellyfish. One can vividly imagine a shapeless, chaotic world. In this shapeless world was born the first particle of life, like the sprout of a reed. Incidentally, Greek mythology depicts a similar story. But it is very different from the description given in the Judeo-Christian Old Testament. In Christianity, at the beginning, there is a God and then God Almighty creates nature and humans. In this respect, the Japanese mythology is closer to the Greek mythology and differs from Judeo-Christian mythologies.

Now, let's get back to the main story. From these three *kami* were born various *kami*. Among them were Izanagi (Male Deity Who Invites) and Izanami (Female Deity Who Invites) and together, after initial failures, they created an island. They descended on to this island and went on creating one island after another. They also created mountains and rivers.

Next, Izanami gave birth to *kami* of fire. Thereafter, however, she was burnt by fire and eventually died. In searching for his beloved wife, Izanagi descended to Yomi no Kuni (Underground World, the land of the dead) and was shocked to find his deceased wife Izanami extremely ugly-looking. Izanami was very upset and furious at having her ugly self seen and cried out, "How dare you! I will kill one

thousand humans a day,” to which Izanagi responded, “Well then, I will create fifteen hundred humans a day.” Then he quickly fled from her. This incident hints that the Japanese population would come to increase though the ages.

Generally, when we speak of the gods and their deeds, we regard them as absolute, rendering the epithet of Almighty. However, here, we see that these *kami* of the Japanese mythology often erred—they initially failed in creating an island, got fatally burned or became appalled upon seeing one’s ugly-looking deceased wife and fled. How totally human they were! This clearly shows how close and familiar *kami-gami* were to the Japanese people.

One cannot help but wonder how several *kami* came to be born out of one *kami*, and not through the intercourse between man and woman. Many *kami* were born from the male Deity Izanagi and from his left eye was born Amaterasu Omikami (Sun Deity), from his right eye, Tsukuyomi no Mikoto (Moon Deity) and from his nostrils came Susano-o no Mikoto (Valiant Intrepid Raging Male Deity). These three *kami* were held in charge of the Plain of High Heaven, the Night World and the Sea, and they became major characters in Japanese mythology.

“Nihon” — a place where the sun rises

Susano-o no Mikoto cried his heart out, longing to visit the underground world where his mother, Izanami, lived. Logically, it is strange that Susano-o no Mikoto thought Izanami to be his mother, for he was born from the male Deity Izanagi. However, people were so familiar and intimate with *kami* who were human-like that they would naturally sympathize with Susano-o in his love for his mother.

Susano-o no Mikoto was told by Izanagi to govern the sea, but he declined the order. I think this refusal of his has great significance. At the center of Takamagahara (the Plain of High Heaven) is the Sun Deity, Amaterasu Omikami. On the plain, there are mountains and rivers and everywhere trees and plants abundantly grow. There, Amaterasu Omikami plows the field and weaves. Takamagahara was a mountainous land or a kind of basin.

On the other hand, it was the sea that Susano–o no Mikoto was told to rule, far away and different from mountainous Takamagaharas, and Susano–o did not like the idea. This clearly shows that *kami* had perceived the difference between the mountain and the sea, the coast and inland.

As a consequence, Susano–o no Mikoto was expelled from Takamagahara, but soon returned to Amaterasu Omikami and proposed to give birth to babies. Thus, five male *kami* and three female *kami* were born. Feeling triumphant following the birth of his female children, for some unknown reason, he went on a rampage. Fearful of him, Amaterasu Omikami hid herself inside Amano Iwato (Heavenly Cave), upon which the entire world fell into pitch–black darkness.

This indicates that Amaterasu Omikami was truly the Sun Deity. She was also the mountain Deity.

The rest of the *kami* were dismayed at the sudden darkness brought about by the Sun Deity disappearing into a mountain cave. In an attempt to draw her out of the cave, Ama no Uzume no Mikoto (Heavenly Crowned Deity) danced a hilarious and fervent dance, naked, in front of the cave and other *kami* joined this feast, making a lot of fuss and applauding her dancing. Curious to know what was going on outside, Amaterasu Omikami slightly opened the rock door that sealed the cave and peeped through, upon which the other *kami* rushed to open the door and pulled her outside. Instantly, the world was filled with light again.

Some may raise an objection, saying the sun is not there to exclusively shine over Japan. Commonly, Sun Deities are mobile, like Helios of Greek mythology, moving freely across the sky. However, Amaterasu Omikami did not move from Takamagahara. In later times, Prince Shotoku called Japan “the country of the rising sun”. This reflects the idea that Japan is located where the sun rises. The country name of “Nihon” means “the origin of the Sun”. The Japanese people supposedly thought that the sun always stays in Japan and had not imagined at all that the sun would freely move in the sky.