

2004

The Goryo cult in Heian period Japan: a study in history, religion, and culture

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
THE UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Senior Thesis

**THE GORYŌ CULT IN HEIAN PERIOD JAPAN:
A STUDY IN HISTORY, RELIGION, AND CULTURE**

By

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts**

MAY 2004

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To my Mother, who let me do whatever I wanted

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INTRODUCTION

The close of the Heian period (794-1185) in Japanese history brought unrest and disturbance to much of the country. Wars concerning political rule and imperial succession, feuds between rival Buddhist temples, and numerous natural disasters made this time one of the most destructive in Japanese history. In the midst of the turmoil, many noblemen and commoners, looking for explanations and resolutions of these horrible events, took greater interest in the condition of those recently deceased during the fighting. Some of the blame thereby came to be associated with *goryō*, also known as *onryō*, or “vengeful spirits,” of the wars. While most departed persons became protective ancestor *kami*, *goryō* were believed to return to this world to bring disease, destruction, and chaos to those who had offended them. In order to appease these malevolent spirits and stop their harmful tendencies, they were enshrined, worshipped, and entertained. The failure to do so was seen as the explanation for the continuation of vengeful acts upon the living.

The Japanese customs for placation of restless spirits did not stop, however, with the abatement of destruction. Enshrined *goryō* became protectors from the same calamities they had been thought to bring or from other harmful deities. As Herbert

Plutschow states, “Controlling the violent nature was believed to be a means to protect institutions from evil deities” (Plutschow 1996, 62). Therefore, the *goryō*, who by definition were malevolent and vindictive, came to fill the reverse role of benevolent protectors under supplication of the people.

Because of the extent to which the belief in *goryō* became involved in the politics, social customs, and religious traditions of medieval Japan, it is imperative to have a firm understanding of the development of the phenomenon and its role in society. This paper presents the Japanese belief in vengeful spirits as it was manifested in the Heian period. Starting from early ancestor veneration, it follows various aspects of the belief as it gained popularity in the court and in the lives of the common people until “by the middle ages, the placation of evil spirits assumed an all-embracing, national scale and importance” (Plutschow 1990, 277). Through methods of placation, rituals involving syncretistic religious traditions, and the transformation of angry spirits into protective deities, the *goryō* cult exerted great influence on the lifestyle of the Japanese people. It is impossible to study the history of Japan without taking into consideration the *goryō* and their role as inspiration for certain religious, artistic, political, and social traditions. Therefore, this paper deals with these topics in a way to further the understanding of the situation of Japan at the time of the Heian court and its relationship with the belief in vengeful spirits.

Gods, Their Festivals, and Their Dwellings

Kami

In modern times, the so-called native religion of Japan, Shintō, is said to be the worship of *kami*. However, the notion of what is exactly meant by the term *kami* is still elusive. While often translated as “deity” or “god” in English, these words place restrictions on the way the reader perceives the essence of *kami*. The translation of the word is made more difficult in part by the lack of consensus in Japan on the derivation of the word from its ancient origins. Japanese scholars have been struggling for centuries to determine a correct etymology and comprehensive explanation of the concept of *kami*, using ancient texts and ideographs, but there is still widespread disagreement on the subject.

Setting etymology aside, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), a famous Japanese scholar devoted to national learning and the Japanese classics, was one of the first and most successful scholars to determine an overarching definition for *kami*. He developed his concept through the study of the *Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters)* (712), which details the mythology and cosmology of early Japanese folklore. Through this study of the usage of the term he arrived at a definition of *kami* which is widely accepted today as the most comprehensive:

Any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe-inspiring, is called *kami*. (Eminence here does not refer simply to superiority in nobility, goodness or meritoriousness. Evil or queer things, if they are extraordinarily awe-inspiring, are also called *kami*). (Matsumoto 1970, 84)

According to this, *kami* are not only “deities” in a personified sense, but also have mystic and naturalistic connotations as well. Hisamatsu Sen’ichi, in his article on the concept of

kami in ancient Japanese poetry, proposes three divisions of the nature of *kami*: absolute, nature, and personal (Hisamatsu 1967, 23). The early concepts of *kami* developed from the folklore perspective of *kami* as related to nature, such as spirits of natural objects or as the objects themselves. Trees, mountains, and lightning are only a few of the awe-inspiring natural phenomena which were considered as *kami* in the early period of Japanese history. As strong political rule solidified, the absolute, or mythological *kami*, became firmly established as the rulers and creators of the Japanese archipelago. These *kami* were often connected to natural phenomena, such as Amaterasu, the sun *kami*, but were personified with human characteristics. The belief in their power and authority created a long history of Japan and a legitimacy of the Imperial line¹.

With the introduction and consequent influence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism from the Asian continent, the concept of *kami* developed a third manifestation, that of the personal *kami*. Deceased ancestors, clan guardian *kami*, and the elevation of the emperor to a divine status are all examples of how the *kami* came to be closely related to the people. For the purpose of this paper, Norinaga's conception of *kami* as an "out of the ordinary" and "awe-inspiring" (Matsumoto 1970, 84) entity will be the implied definition for all references. However, as it will be shown, the many manifestations of *kami* as absolute, natural, and personal will be essential in the development of the concept of the *goryō* belief and its status among the concept of the divine.

¹ The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (720), the earliest Japanese historical works, were written in the 8th century by Imperial command to record the mythology and history of the Japanese people. They, in effect, legitimized the Imperial line by claiming the emperor's descent from Amaterasu through her grandson Ninigi.

Matsuri

In modern Japanese, the word *matsuri* is a noun that refers to the festival celebrations at shrines and temples which occur throughout the year. These celebrations often include elaborate processions, traditional dances, and special foods shared by friends and family. However, the verb from which it is derived, *matsuru*, indicates service to and worship of the *kami* (Ono 1962, 50). It connotes anything from the simple recognition of a shrine when passing to daily rituals in the home and ceremonies for major events. It implies a certain reverential attitude which is often overshadowed by boisterous festivities today.

In times past, the verb *matsuru* was often used in a compound as *matsurigoto*, which literally translates as “worship affairs.” There, worship of the *kami* was considered an integral part of the government system; it was not a separate experience (Ono 1962, 76). Prayers and rituals were offered to the *kami* not only for health, happiness, and prosperity of the people, but also performed for the protection of the state and local government. In this way, the upkeep of shrines and the performance of certain rituals came under the jurisdiction of the government as their prerogative and duty. These rituals often involved the appeasement and entertainment of the *kami*, which then provides a third interpretation, as set forth by Hori Ichiro: *matsuri* means “inviting and waiting for *kami*” (Hori 1969, 297).

Shrines and Temples - *Jinja* and *Otera*

Because Japan has many religious traditions, it is necessary to differentiate the terminology concerning places of worship. The two largest religious traditions in Japan are Shintō and Buddhism. Shintō, as previously mentioned, concerns the worship of *kami*. Although *kami* can be, and are, worshipped without any formal building, most have a designated sacred space. This space is referred to as a *jinja*, or shrine. It is usually located in a wooded area, consisting of at least three buildings: the *haiden*, the outer building from which regular worshippers worship, the *heiden*, the offerings hall into which only the priests can enter, and the *honden*, the building which holds the *goshintai*, the “body” of the *kami*, into which no one may enter. Many moderate size shrines are in this form, while larger shrines also include dance stages and small sub-shrines surrounding the area. There are also numerous small road-side shrines consisting of a miniaturized version of the shrine buildings, along with household shrines called *kamidana*, literally “god shelf.” All of these worship places having to do with Shinto will be referred to as shrines.

Japan’s second major religion is Buddhism. The sects of Buddhism vary widely in Japan, but their places of worship are all called *otera*, or temples². The architectural style of temple and shrine are similar. Both usually have areas designated for worshippers, and areas restricted to priests or monks. However, temples usually contain additional buildings, such as lecture halls, halls in which the image is held, and in the case of an

² When a member of the family dies, most households buy a *butsudan*, which is a small Buddhist altar to hold the memorial tablet of their loved one. Although this does not make the house a temple, it is an important place of Buddhist worship.

active monastery, halls for the monks. Temples are often enclosed by large walls with heavy wooden doors. Large temples may also have pagodas and gardens.

While *jinja* and *otera* are clearly distinct today, in early Japan, after Buddhism first entered the country (c.552), they existed in syncretism, and were often located together. These places of worship were called *jisha*, or as Allan Grapard translates, “shrine-temple multiplexes” (Grapard 1992, 1). Close connections between the religious traditions made combination cultic centers the norm, rather than the exception. It was not until the Meiji Restoration (1868) when the institutions were forced to separate and came to have the names under which they are known today.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND THE FOUNDATION OF *GORYŌ* BELIEF

Since early times, the Japanese have held the belief that deceased ancestors remain close to this world to watch over their descendents (Takeda 2002, 2). Early Japanese customs dictated the respect of ancestors as guardians and moral guides who were constantly in attendance. Originally referred to as *mitama*, the peaceful soul of an ancestor, these spirits provided a sort of guardianship over their descendents in return for the carrying out of proper rites after death. All people were revered after their death at their home as ancestral *kami* (Ueda 2002, 14), and were active in the lives of their family.

Beyond ancestors worshipped in the immediate family, there were *uji-gami* and *hito-gami* (Hori 1968, 30-38). *Uji-gami* (clan *kami*) was a tutelary shrine system set up in an agrarian society. The *uji* was the family, clan, or kinship group who claimed a common ancestor. This system emphasized the exclusiveness of the protection of the *kami* to those who had direct ties to it, whether through ancestral or community relations. These *kami* exemplified the function of a deified ancestor; they were called upon as guardians in a vague and unspecific manner, having received their divinity through rites and reverence after death. This easy transformation from human to *kami* is explained in the early tenets of Shintō mythology. The *kami*, the earth, and humanity all came from

the same substance in the beginning, and therefore, “there is no large difference or discontinuation between *kami* and man, nature and human beings” (Takeda 2002, 13). In this way, the *uji-gami* was created through transference of the respect given to an elder community member to reverence accorded to a protective deity. This allowed the ancestor continuity and influence in the community. It was tied through kinship and community bonds to the political, economic, and social environment of its extended family. Great respect and feelings of obligation by the family kept the connection between *kami* and constituency intimate and patriarchal.

Because of its close ties to the family and community, the *uji-gami* did not just receive the respect accorded it in rites and offerings, but demanded it. Lack of diligent communication with and reverence to the guardian spirit was a dangerous negligence, leaving open the possibility that the *kami* would take away protection of the crops, safe-keeping of the welfare of the community, and in some cases become a bringer of bad fortune. There were many cases where the ancestral spirit was considered to have brought disaster upon the household as punishment for neglect or shame brought to it by a family member (Smith 1974, 56). The *uji-gami*, just as humans, had a jealous side which had to be placated in order to procure the safety and well-being of the community.

The *uji-gami*, as a member of the family and clan system, stayed within and was protective only unto its descendents. Its power did not extend outside of the community, and it could only be called upon in those matters pertaining to its land of heritage. In contrast to these, *hito-gami* existed outside of the patriarchal lineage system. The *hito-gami* system was based on the relationship not of family and tutelary deity, but of a

certain *kami* and a magico-religious person, such as a shaman (Hori 1968, 31). This *kami* drew its support and following from anyone who wished to believe and was not exclusive in its membership. It gathered adherents from inside different communities and brought them together regardless of family or regional associations. The *hito-gami* had the ability to attract such a wide range of believers because of the manifestation of its power. Unlike the *uji-gami*, who filled the guardian role in a vague and undefined sort of way, the *hito-gami* had a special characteristic, a personality, and a human counterpart to explain its powers. The emphasis on respect because of ancestry or familial ties was not found in the *hito-gami* system, rather, the relationship was one of faith. The authority of the *kami* was channeled through the divine servant's inspired words and actions.

Both the *uji-gami* and *hito-gami* systems included a belief in the potential malevolent characteristics of *kami*. Lack of veneration could turn a benevolent ancestor into a vengeful ghost, or make a neglected *kami* reveal its wrathful face. Accidental or unnatural deaths induced fear that the spirits could return to this world to bring disease or distress to those who had any relation to the deceased. It was therefore very important to perform all the correct rituals for ancestors, *uji-gami*, and *hito-gami* in a timely fashion.

What Is Goryō?

The term *goryō* was originally not associated with the vengeful qualities of a deceased person. It developed its meaning along with the popularity of the cult. As Yanagita Kunio explains (1970, 87-91), originally an ancestor's peaceful soul was called a *mitama*. Literally this means an honorable (*mi*) soul (*tama*). However, with the

introduction of Chinese culture and writing system, the use of this word became complicated. Japanese words were written in Chinese characters according to phonetics. However, no suitable characters could be found which produced the word *mitama*. Hence, the educated, in order to preserve the appearance of elevated knowledge, would not use the word because it could not be written in Chinese characters. Instead, a new word was created using the meaning of the characters. This word was *goryō* (御霊). It also literally means “honorable soul or spirit.” It was used by the nobles in place of *mitama* until the Heian period when it became associated with the vengeful spirits and the ceremonies (*goryō-e*) held to placate them. *Goryō* thence ceased to mean a “peaceful ancestral spirit”, and took on the exclusive meaning of a “vengeful ghost.”

The Chinese did not only influence Japanese conceptions of *goryō* by means of language. While the Japanese obtained many ideas about vengeful spirits through early folk tradition, there also existed some influences from the Chinese beliefs in a similar phenomenon. The Chinese believed that vengeful ghosts were “the ghosts of those unjustly killed who return to seek vengeance on their killers” (Cohen 1982, v). Misfortunes and deaths of unknown causes were frequently attributed to ghosts. Often, the perpetrator of a ghastly deed was not punished outright, but his descendents were plagued with illnesses and accidents.

Like many of the Japanese concepts, these native beliefs also existed prior to the importation of Buddhism from India. They were taken up by Buddhism to promote morality and strengthen the hierarchical system. The book *Accounts of Vengeful Souls* was written in the sixth century as a teaching tool meant to reinforce the conceptions of

revenge from the other world in order to stem violence in this world. The Chinese system of government had no difficulty in obtaining justice against those who had murdered others. Rather, they thought that vengeful ghosts could and would exact justice from those who had somehow escaped their due punishment.

Through the combination of certain aspects of the *uji-gami* and *hito-gami* systems with the influence from mainland China, the Japanese belief in the *goryō* evolved. The *uji-gami* system was deeply ingrained in the minds of the Japanese. The emphasis on respect in a hierarchical society extended to the ancestors and one was always observant of one's duties. The consequences of neglect were readily known. It was not a difficult leap, therefore, for people to apply their knowledge of the caring and placation of an ancestor to the disasters in the capital. Their experience with ancestor veneration made it easy for people to realize the potential danger of the unnatural deaths of noblemen. This belief was enhanced by the presence of those associated with the *hito-gami* system. The shamans and oracles who relayed the desires and anger of the vengeful spirits created a link between the newly created *goryō* and the people who were not related, but were affected by its anger. The spirit became a powerful being, bringing destruction to everyone. Although the structure of its relationship was that of a *hito-gami* system, the methods of placation and treatment followed closely the *uji-gami* scheme. In this way, the *goryō* cult of the Heian Period grew quickly. Native traditions, familiar rituals, and magical intermediaries made the disasters understandable, although not necessarily less frightening.

THE NATURE OF THE POLITICAL VICTIMS

In Nara and Heian Japan, the term *goryō* carried the implication that the offended being was of imperial descent. In general, the prefix “go” is often added to a word to indicate the “honorableness” of the noun. The dead were venerated in this way, being called *goryō*, or “honorable spirits.” Because of the increased knowledge of the frequency of deaths at court in the Heian era, the word became associated with the imperial family and especially their departed relatives. In previous times, the lives of the imperial family and those connected with the imperial household had been contained within the palace walls. Poisonings, beheadings, and all manners of assassinations during fights for successions were kept as much as possible away from the knowledge of the general public. However, as the imperial family increased in size and influence, it became more and more difficult to keep these occurrences hidden from the populace. The deaths of princes, noblemen, and future emperors became common knowledge and began to take on further significance in the minds of the people. As Kyoto was plagued by one disaster after another, and the knowledge of imperial deaths spread, the people channeled their panic into one logical conclusion: If the unfortunate death of a family member could cause a small disturbance, how much more so could the untimely death of

a member of the imperial family? In this way, the calamities in the capital were associated with political turmoil within the palace, and the term *goryō* came to refer to the vengeful spirits of the imperial court.

Prince Sawara

Prince Sawara (d.785) was one of the first political victims recognized as *goryō*. Sawara was the brother of Emperor Kammu (r.782-805), who in 784 began to move the capital from Nara to a new site approximately 30 miles north at Nagaoka. This move was the emperor's attempt to break away from the Buddhist sects which had gained a powerful hold on Nara politics, and start drastic reforms in a new location unsullied by prior corruption. During the time of construction, the emperor's most trusted minister, Fujiwara Tanetsugu was killed, and Prince Sawara was accused of plotting his murder as part of a revolt against the move. He was stripped of his rank and exiled to Awaji, an island near Kobe, where he died mysteriously within the year; some say he starved himself to death. After his death, the imperial family suffered many misfortunes, including the death of the emperor's wife. Kammu attributed this to the spirit of Sawara and its connection to Nagaoka. He decided once again to move the capital, this time not away from the influence of the Buddhists, but from the *goryō* of Prince Sawara. In addition, he tried several times to appease the spirit by bringing back the prince's remains from Awaji, but mysterious circumstances delayed the search and it wasn't until years later that Kammu was able to set up a shrine to his brother's ghost.

Early examples of vengeful ghosts, such as Prince Sawara, Prince Iyo, and Fujiwara Nakanami,³ show how ghosts returned to exact revenge from their murderers. An imperial assassination was inevitably followed by disasters within the court. Family members and powerful ministers became suddenly sick; empresses and princes died mysteriously. The extent of the impact was not attributed to events in the public domain, however. It was not until the middle of the Heian Period when the Fujiwara had effectively taken control of the political power that the effects of imperial *goryō* were felt outside of the palace walls. At that time, the Fujiwara's infiltration of all ministerial positions by the intermarriage of their daughters with the imperial family increased the size of the imperial court and hence the noticeability of its actions by the common people. Political deaths ceased to be of significance only to the nobility; they also became a problem for the inhabitants of the entire city.

Sugawara no Michizane

One of the most famous examples of a political victim whose revenge affected the entire capital is Sugawara no Michizane (845-903). Michizane was the son of a middle-class man, but was promoted through the ranks because of his great literary, calligraphic, and political skills. Emperor Uda (r.887-97) promoted him to Udajin (Minister of the Right), one of the highest positions at court. This promotion marked the first time in many years that someone other than a Fujiwara held a high position, and only the second

³ Prince Iyo was a victim of an imperial succession dispute in 807. Fujiwara Nakanami was accused of instigating the Kusuko uprising in 810.

time someone of middle rank had achieved such an office.⁴ Michizane's new rank and office did not please the Fujiwara, especially Fujiwara Tokihira, who occupied the office of Sadaijin (Minister of the Left). When Uda abdicated in favor of his son Emperor Daigo (885-930), he encouraged him to trust Michizane as an educated advisor. Daigo was young, however, and easily influenced. Tokihira created false allegations that Michizane was plotting to overthrow the emperor and place his younger brother on the throne. As a result, Michizane was exiled to Kyushu where he died two years later, on February 25, 903.

Michizane's exile and death removed him bodily from the imperial court, but his presence was felt in the capital for many years to come. For the first ten years following his death, the capital was plagued by a series of natural disasters. Droughts, epidemics, floods, violent thunderstorms, an earthquake, and destructive fires continued until around 930. The Udaijin had been popular among the people and it was easy for them to connect his wrongful death to these calamities. They prayed and held rites of appeasement in order to stop the destruction caused by his vengeful spirit. In addition to events effecting the entire populace, there are several accounts of Michizane's personal wrath against those directly responsible for his downfall. Tokihira was possessed by Michizane's spirit in the form of a blue dragon, Minamoto no Hikaru was dragged to death by his horse, and the Crown Prince Yasuyori was possessed and killed by Michizane's spirit. The most dramatic record of his vengeance, however, occurred in 930, as recorded in the *Nihongiiryaku* and quoted by Plutschow:

⁴ The first man of the middle class to hold such a position was Kibi no Makibi who gained favor in the court through his travels in China, and was promoted to the office of Udaijin in 766.

The weather was clear. A black cloud moved in from Mt. Atago and quickly covered the sky. It thundered loudly and lightning struck the Seiryō-den. The wall caught fire. Dainagon Fujiwara no Kiyotsura's dress caught fire, his breast split and he died instantly, age 64. Uchuben Taira no Mareyo suffered burns in his face. At the Shishinden: Hyōe-no-Suke Mibu Tadakane's hair caught fire and he died. Ki no Kagetsura's stomach split open and he lost consciousness. Azumi Munehito's knees sustained burns and he could no longer get up. The Emperor fell ill. An epidemic reigned. (Plutschow 2000)

Oracles both prior to and following this event linked Michizane's spirit to a thunder god, thus strengthening his connection to any destructive thunderstorm.

During the years of disaster allegedly caused by Michizane, the court attempted several times to appease his spirit and cause it to cease its destructive tendencies. In 923, Sugawara Michizane was posthumously restored to Udajjin (Minister of the Right), Second Rank, the same office and rank as before his demotion. In addition, two places of veneration, Anraku-ji at the Dazaifu in Kyushu and the Kitano Shrine in Kyoto, were set up to him according to oracles received by a priest and a *miko* (shrinemaiden). In subsequent years, the Kitano Shrine became the stage for Michizane's transformation into a benevolent deity.

Prince Sawara and Sugawara no Michizane are just two examples of the influence of the court's actions on the increase in the belief of *goryō* both inside and outside of the palace walls. Kyoto's unfortunate tendency to be struck with natural disasters and the Fujiwara clan's quest for complete control coincided in such a way as to strengthen the already present native beliefs of vengeful ghosts and create a nation-wide fear of the neglect of the dead.

APPEASEMENT RITES

There were several ways to appease these malevolent spirits and stop their harmful tendencies. In the case of family members or neglected ancestors, simple rites and prayers along with offerings and continued attention were often enough to placate the ghosts. If the reason for the disturbance involved a body that was not properly laid to rest in its home, the remains would have to be found and interred with the proper ceremonies at the proper burial site. This was the case with Prince Sawara, whose remains were brought back to Kyoto from Awaji. People often said prayers as an effective means of prevention against those who had died with a chance of becoming a *goryō*. In addition, telling stories and tales about spirits was said to appease their anger. However, when disasters were large or lasted for many years, more drastic measures had to be taken. Noblemen were posthumously restored to their former ranks and offices, large ceremonies of appeasement were held, and some *goryō* were enshrined as *kami*.

Goryō-e

Special services of recognition and appeasement, called “*goryō-e*,” recognized the power of the unsettled spirits and attempted to pacify them through worship and

entertainment. Failure to perform these services was seen as the explanation for the continuation of vengeful acts upon the living. One of the first large-scale ceremonies of this kind occurred in 863 at the Shinsen-en, the garden of the Imperial Palace. This *goryō-e* was held in response to a large tuberculosis epidemic and included the opening of the palace gates to all citizens. The honorable spirits were six former members of the imperial family brought to untimely deaths mostly during succession disputes and all at the hands of the Fujiwara. They were Prince Sawara (d.784), Prince Iyo (executed in 807) and his mother Kisshi,⁵ Fujiwara no Nakanari (executed in 810), Tachibana no Hayanari (executed in 842), Bunya no Miyatamaro (executed in 842), and Mononobe no Moriya (d.587). The departed spirits were properly venerated with the reading of Buddhist sutras, the *Konkōmyōkyō* (*Golden Light Sutra*) and the *Hannyashingyō* (*Heart Sutra*), and entertained with dance, music, archery, sumō wrestling, and horse racing. The common people also brought with them exuberant musicians who played with a frenzy to cleanse themselves of the bad influences of the *goryō*. Several years later, two more *goryō* were added to the original group, Kibi no Makibi (693-775) and Sugawara no Michizane (845-903), and enshrined in the nearby Kami Goryō Jinja, traditionally proscribed as the protective shrine of the Imperial Palace. Together, these eight spirits were called the Eight August Spirits, the most worshipped of *goryō*.

⁵ It is unclear why Prince Iyo's mother, Kisshi, is not recognized separately, but is counted together with her son.

Nembutsu

Government supported *goryō-e* were not the only means to subdue *goryō*. Although there was a decree issued in 865 prohibiting the gathering of commoners for *goryō-e*, this did not stop the performance of *goryō* rites and activities. One of the most popular means was through the reciting of the *nembutsu*, a phrase expressing devotion to the Amida Buddha. It was thought to assure the practitioner a place in Amida's Pure Land after death. The *nembutsu* was adopted as a means of both pacification of the malevolent spirits and salvation of their souls. The recitation calmed them and sent them to the Pure Land. This practice was equally effective if performed for spirits who had not yet caused any trouble, but because of the circumstances of their deaths might eventually become *goryō*.

The practice of the *nembutsu*, brought back from China through the Tendai sect of Buddhism and spread through the common people by wandering monks, popularized the notion that "nothing was impossible to a determined mind at the moment of death" (Hori 1968, 121). This applied not only to entrance into the Pure Land, but also to vengeance for a wronged person. Buddhism brought to Japan the concept of the buddha-self, a belief that inherent in everyone is the possibility of becoming a buddha. As some of the basic tenets of Buddhism reached the commoners through practices such as the *nembutsu*, they began to realize that they too had the inner strength to realize their will upon death. Many took this newfound knowledge as an opportunity to hope for entrance into the Pure Land, while others realized the possibility of wreaking vengeance on their enemies after death.

Shugendō

Another way to deal with *goryō* was through exorcism. While the *nembutsu*'s purpose was to ward off or pacify the spirit, exorcism, mostly practiced through the magic of Shugendō, was aimed at driving off an already present spirit. Shugendō was a practice to attain magico-ascetic powers through intense physical training in the mountains. Originally thought to be associated with early mountain worship and agricultural rites, it gradually synthesized aspects of religious Taoism, esoteric Buddhism, and yin-yang divination (Earhart 1970, 1-37). Through ascetic practices and self-cultivation, the practitioners, called *yamabushi* (those who lie in the mountains), gained magical powers that they used to aid those in need. The practitioners would then descend to the villages offering purification and protection charms. They would say spells for agricultural success and perform life-cycle rites. Their magical powers also made them adept at exorcizing malevolent spirits. With the help of a medium, usually a shamaness, the *yamabushi* discovered the spirit's grievance and attempted to subdue it. Because of proximity to the mountains, Shugendō practitioners were the main source of religious aid for those who dwelt in small villages in rural areas, and were hence one of the only practical options for relief from *goryō* disturbances.

Onmyō-dō

Onmyō-dō (Yin-yang) is a third manner by which the populace pacified evil spirits. This practice was brought to Japan with Chinese culture from the mainland between the fifth and seventh centuries. Originally, Taoist and Yin-yang beliefs were

subsumed under esoteric Buddhist practices. However, as the popularity of spells and astrology increased, these traditions gained greater importance in the court. The Bureau of Yin-yang (*Onmyō-ryō*) was established under the Ministry of the State (*Nakatsukasa*) in the Taiho Code of 701 to regulate the four main functions of Yin-yang practices: cosmology, astronomy, calendar calculations, and time keeping. Many of these practices benefited the state, but by the tenth century they had become an integral part of the aristocracy. Courtiers depended on *inyō-dō* (yin-yang divination) for personal fortunes, and furthermore, they would not perform even daily functions such as bathing and traveling without the consultation of the directions for luck or misfortune. The main rite associated with the directions was purification of the directions. Purification rituals in directions known to harbor deities of disaster and disease pacified the malevolent spirits and prevented misfortunes from occurring. Because of their popularity, these rites entered into and became associated with Shintō and popular folk beliefs (Masuo 2000, 821-42). Yin-yang rituals took over many of the former functions of Shintō rituals, such as the driving away of pestilence. Having gradually melded with popular beliefs among the commoners, it provided another means to console the malevolent spirits of the dead. Warding off spirits of the directions included pacifying spirits of the dead, offerings at crossroads regulated angry ghosts, and special amulets protected the bearer from misfortunes. In this way, Yin-yang divination exerted influence on the methods of *goryō* pacification.

While all three, *nembutsu*, Shugendō, and Onmyō-dō, were used individually against *goryō*, the most prevalent means of appeasement involved their combination.

Both practitioners of Shugen-dō and Onmyō-dō were apt to communicate with the spirit through shamanesses, the practice of the *nembutsu* and Shugen-dō both derived in part from Tendai Buddhist practices, and all three meshed in many ways with popular folk Shintō beliefs. The syncretistic nature of these practices made them open to commoners and nobility alike. It was much more common to witness rituals from at least two of the three traditions at large *goryō-e* than to see just one.

Extreme Measures

In some cases, prayers, exorcisms, and *goryō-e* did not stop disasters from occurring. In such cases, if the person had previously been of high rank, two courses were taken. The first was the restoration of rank and office, and sometimes the promotion of rank. Prince Sawara, who was exiled and died in Awaji, was posthumously given the rank of emperor and was renamed Sudō Tennō (Emperor Sudō) years after his death in order to cease disturbances on the imperial family. The second was official enshrinement. This could be the enshrinement as a highly elevated *goryō*, such as what occurred in 863 at the Shinsen-in, or the enshrinement of the spirit as a new *kami*. Such was the case with the spirit of Sugawara no Michizane. As mentioned previously, Michizane was the Udaijin under Emperors Uda and Daigo who was accused of plotting the overthrow of the Emperor. He died in exile, but his spirit would not be pacified. Over the course of about thirty years, many disasters were attributed to Michizane, including floods, epidemics, thunderstorms, and deaths of the nobility. The Fujiwara clan

attempted to pacify him through prayers, by holding *goryō-e*, and by restoring to him to Udaijin, Second Rank. These were not enough, however, and the tragedies continued.

Shortly after his death, an official who had accompanied Michizane into exile received an oracle telling him to set up a shrine to Michizane as Tenman Daijissai Tenjin, an Indian deity. He set up Anraku-ji (lit. Peace and Comfort Temple) at the Dazaifu, the government head in Kyushu. In 919, after the failure of previous pacification attempts, Fujiwara no Tadahira rebuilt this temple, and years later, his son Morosuke began work on the Kitano Shrine in the capital. The site was chosen by an oracle from Michizane which said to worship him at the place of the thunder god (Plutschow 2000). Imperial visits were made to the shrine, treasures were offered, and the Kitano Tenjin Goden, a biography of Michizane's life, was compiled. Because of these shrines, and the actions associated with them, Michizane sent word in an oracle that he was no longer angry. From this time on, Michizane's spirit no longer brought calamities to the capital. Instead, the worship of the deity Tenjin as a deity of calligraphy, literature, and scholastic interests spread throughout much of Japan.

The deification of *goryō* was not limited to influential court officials, although those were the ones most noticeable in their vengeance. As the belief in *goryō* spread, smaller villages also came to have their own enshrined *goryō* that had caused trouble in their own community. Although these *kami* were not universally worshipped across the country, they served an important role in the community which they protected.

GORYŌ IN THE ARTS

Herbert Plutschow contends that another popular way to placate vengeful spirits was through the arts (Plutschow 2000). Much of Heian and Kamakura (1185-1333) literature involved wonderful tales of wars and brave warriors. Memorializing these men and others in the songs, poetry, and literature was thought to soothe their spirits and quiet their disturbances. Poetry was believed to have a calming affect on what were called *araburugami*, spirits with the potential to cause havoc for one reason or another. The Japanese word for “poem” or “song” is *uta*. According to Plutschow, it can be traced to the verb *utsu* which means “to placate” (Plutschow 1996, 106). It is not surprising, then, that verses were read at placation services in order to both entertain and appease the angry spirit. The most effective poems were those telling the victim’s story; these recitations held the spirit’s wrath and released it in an orderly and beneficial manner. Through these performances unstructured and unmediated anger was channeled and turned toward a harmonious discharge.

Dancing often accompanied the songs and poems of a ritual. In the early Shintō tradition and still today, dancing is considered to be a means of appeasement and exorcism. Frenzied dancing to dynamic rhythms invited a temporary possession by the

spirit which then could be expelled through the appropriate ritual. Exuberant dancing worked in many placation rituals because it not only dealt with the act of appeasement, but also purged and purified those touched by the influence of the angry spirit. The common people particularly participated in this aspect of the ritual because it allowed them to take an active role in an event that directly affected their lives. Many of the bans on non-government sponsored *goryō-e* were attempts to stop the common people from gathering and participating in enthusiastic group empowerment, which often turned into riots threatening the government.

Biwa Monks

In addition to poetry and dancing, early Shintō traditions also employed the *biwa*, a Japanese lute, as the primary musical instrument relating to evil spirits. It was believed that the *biwa* was especially effective in summoning and placating angry or disturbed spirits. For that reason, certain blind *biwa* players, called *mōsō*, were set aside and trained especially in the appeasement of spirits. The Empress Genmei (661-721) thought so highly of these musicians that she summoned them specifically to ward off the evil spirits that she felt had caused unusual events in the court. The blind *biwa* players eventually were formed into a guild under a prestigious family and became famous and well respected. One of their most important contributions is their recitation of the *Tales of the Heike* (c.1221).

After their defeat, the ghosts of the Heike were numerous, and only retribution of large import was felt to be sufficient. That retribution came in the form of a long ballad

memorializing the deeds of brave warriors and their sacrifices. The blind *biwa* players were charged with the task of eulogizing these spirits in recitation. In addition, they also held rituals every year on March 24 on the Kamo River in Kyoto for the appeasement of the infant Emperor Antoku (1178-1185). Antoku was drowned with his mother during a battle on March 24. Because of his status as an emperor, his potential power as a *goryō* was large. After several disasters, it was decided that a large-scale event be held, and to supplement this, blind *biwa* players assumed the responsibility of yearly rites of appeasement.

Noh Theater

Noh theater was another form of appeasement in the arts of Japan. Noh developed as a form of entertainment for the *kami* and became popular as a dramatic art among both commoners and nobility. Because of its ties to native rites and entertainment of the *kami*, it was an easy for its content to modify toward stories of placation. Over half of all Noh stories involve telling the stories of *goryō* and offering them salvation in order to placate them. In their two acts, Noh plays skillfully combine the three actions which are performed the most to rid the world of a vengeful ghost. The first is a retelling of the victim's story, usually spoken by the *shite*, the main actor playing the victim. The second is a dance, again performed by the *shite*, acting out the victim's tragic demise. This dance is accompanied by enthusiastic drumming, chanting, and playing of flutes, which is similar to that of the music in shrine rituals. The dance is symbolic not only of the action which caused the victim to become a vengeful spirit, but also of the release of anger

which holds the spirit to this world and causes it to wreak havoc on the inhabitants. The third part of the play is the salvation. In many cases, the *wake*, or secondary actor, is a priest, or an enemy who became a priest in retribution for killing a person. There is a dialogue between the spirit and the priest in which the spirit asks for the prayers of the priest. The priest agrees and prays for the spirit's soul to find peace and enter the Pure Land, both placating and saving the vengeful ghost from further tormented time on this earth.

One of the most famous of this kind of Noh plays is called *Atsumori*, which was written by the most famous of Noh authors, Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1443). It is a play concerning the placation of a young flute-playing Heike warrior named Atsumori. His spirit is wandering in disguise, looking for its murderer, when it comes upon a priest deeply engrossed in prayer and thought. The priest is in fact, the warrior Kumagai who killed Atsumori in the battle by the sea, who has taken priestly vows because of the guilt of his deed. Neither recognizes each other, but as the play progresses and the spirit tells his story, it is revealed that he is Atsumori and the priest is his enemy. However, through the telling of the story, and the dance of anger, Atsumori wears out his wrath and feels only a sadness and pain. He pleads for the priest to pray for his salvation, which is done immediately, and the ghost leaves with the assurance of soon gaining entrance into the Pure Land.

The effectiveness of the Noh theater as a placatory device lies in the actors on the stage. Storytelling and recitation only require the words to be shared, but acting out the thoughts and actions of the victim bring the feelings of pain and sadness to life. "In Noh

theater spirits are more effectively placated when the identities of the ghost and the storyteller blur and the reciter speaks as if it was the ghost himself telling the story” (Plutschow 1997, 77).

Literature

While dramatic and musical events were certainly popular means of placation, literature was an equally enthusiastic method for appeasement. Even before the monk Jien (1155-1225) wrote his book *Gukanshō* in 1219 reminding the leaders to “protect the nation by placating evil spirits” (Plutschow 1997, 74), authors and compilers had been taking this task seriously. As early as the compilation of the *Manyōshū* (c.750), a collection of poetry, the inclusion of works by political victims was a prominent practice. Umehara Takeshi brings forth a theory that the *Manyōshū* did not only include the works of prominent victims, but was actually compiled as a ritual act of placation. The poet Hitomara Kakinomoto, who was exiled unjustly and died in 708, has the most poems in the anthology, followed by several other victims’ works. In this way, the spirits could be appeased by the constant reciting of their verse, and the knowledge that they would be remembered.

As mentioned earlier in reference to the blind *biwa* players, the *Tales of the Heike* was an extremely important act of literary placation. It is thought that the monk Jien, who advised the nobility to be conscientious of the victims of the war with the Heike, encouraged the writing of this work. In addition, he set up the temple Daisenpoin where sutras were read and *segaki-e* rituals to appease angry ghosts were held. His support of

the *Tales of the Heike* made it one of the most popular literary works of appeasement. Because of his Buddhist background he believed that “storytelling helped release the victims from the karma cycle” (Plutschow 1990, 224). The more often the story was told, the better the victim’s chances of entering the Pure Land.

Another work influenced by a political situation was the *Okagami*, a story of the Fujiwara family during the Heian period. Although written like an autobiography, this text is filled with manipulations set forth by the Fujiwara to increase their status in the imperial court. Assassinations and false accusations which led to death in exile filled the Fujiwara history with a large number of political victims who were looking for revenge. The *Okagami* is an attempt to appease the offended spirits and keep the Fujiwara from further political troubles.

Visual Arts

In addition to texts, there were several paintings and drawings created that told the stories of political victims. One of the best known of these is the *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki*, a handscroll composed around 1194 telling the story of Suguwara Michizane and the founding of his Kitano shrine. It is a set of five handscrolls with thirty-seven illustrations of the events of Michizane’s life, his revenge, and his pacification. Figure 1 shows one scene from this story when Michizane returns in the form of a thunder god to strike down the ministers who had been the plotters of his downfall. He not only strikes them with lightning, but sets the palace on fire as well. This illustration is just a

representation of the many drawings of different vengeful spirits which were produced in the medieval period in Japan.



Figure 1. *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki* (selection), 13th century Japan.
Reprinted from the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
<http://www.metmuseum.org>.

The Legacy of *Goryō* Festivals

The rites and rituals that were a means of *goryō* pacification often spawned much larger events, such as *matsuri*. These festivals often had their origin in a natural disaster or an epidemic which was associated with a *goryō* or an angry spirit. The core of the *matsuri* was the elaborate ceremony of appeasement, a *goryo-e* to worship and entertain the ghost. However, in addition to these rites, there was dancing, music, and games to expunge the feeling of evil which was brought by the presence of an angry spirit. Over the years, *matsuri* originating in *goryō* pacification became more and more elaborate as they collected traditions from changing society and incorporated new aspects of the

vengeful spirits, many of whom were no longer seen as threats, but as benefactors. There were three major *matsuri* traditions in the Kyoto area which derived from *goryō-e* of the Heian period. These were Kyoto's Gion Matsuri and Aoi Matsuri, and the rural custom of 'Mushi-okuri.' All three of these continued into the present day with only minor variations due to culture shifts over the centuries. They represent the rituals and ceremonies of Heian *goryō* belief.

Kyoto's Gion Matsuri is perhaps the largest and most elaborate festivals in Japan. It began in the ninth century as a response to an epidemic thought to have been brought by the angry manifestation of Susa-no-o, the wind and storm *kami* and his Buddhist counterpart Gozu Tenno, the bringer of diseases. In order to appease them, the emperor sent offerings to the Gion Shrine and had sixty-six halberds raised and decorated to represent the sixty-six provinces of Japan at that time. These were paraded through the city along with a *mikoshi*, a sacred palanquin, in order to placate the angry spirits and convince them to take the epidemic away. Because the epidemic abated, the ritual was seen as effective, and was continued year after year as a preventative measure.

Over the years, the ritual became more elaborate as merchants donated supplies and finery to decorate not only halberds, but huge floats to parade through the city. The ritual became a full blown *matsuri*, several days long with many ceremonies, parades, rituals, dancing, and celebrating. Although the original purpose was to appease an angry spirit, this summer *matsuri* became instead a celebration of wealth and an appeal for good health in the coming year. The appeasement of Susa-no-o and Gozu Tenno was not

forgotten, as the appropriate rites are still carried out for them in the midst of the celebration.

One of Kyoto's spring celebrations is the Aoi Matsuri. This *goryō-e* festival began in response to a drought and famine believed to be caused by evil spirits. The emperor of that time, Emperor Yomei (585-587), sent a prince to the Kamo Shrine in order to make offerings of placation and pray for rain. The procession of the prince from the palace to the shrine turned into an imperial *matsuri* repeated yearly for the continuance of good rainfall and the absence of drought. At the same time as the procession, there was also a ceremony for the placation of the spirits of the cherry blossoms. It was thought that cherry blossoms had spirits, which when they fell from the trees at the prime of their beauty would become angry and bring about epidemics. The Aoi Matsuri included ceremonies to appease these spirits and make the "flowers rest in peace" (Plutschow 1990, 87).

A third kind of *matsuri* held for placation was called a "*mushi-okuri*," or insect placation. These were often held in rural agricultural areas to ward off insects. The origin of this festival goes back to a warrior named Sanemori who was killed unjustly. His angry spirit was linked to an insect attack on the fields of the farmers. From that time, agricultural areas perform rites and hold festivals to keep away the insects controlled by his vengeful spirit. These *matsuri* were often accompanied by drums and effigies, which were thought to be very powerful tools of placation.

These three *matsuri* are just a few examples of how simple rites of appeasement became elaborate events that have been carried out throughout the centuries. The

centrality of *goryō* placation to all these celebrations did not lessen in the years following their instigation, but were elaborated upon by the people who played important roles in their production. *Matsuri* was another effective way of dealing with the active spirits in everyday life.

TRANSFORMATION

The Japanese customs for placation of restless spirits did not stop with the abatement of destruction and disease. After decades of dealing with the consequences of vengeance, the fear which accompanied the dangerous spirits was transformed into a positive awe and respect for what came to be called “*goryō-shin*.” These beings were *goryō* who, when enshrined, became protector deities from the same calamities they brought or from other harmful deities. This change occurred gradually as “people believed more and more strongly that their petitions would surely be granted, because a spirit so severe in curses would surely be powerful in giving benefits” (Yanagita 1970, 123). Many of the new *goryō-shin* were not actually newly enshrined *goryō*, but were well-established *kami* whose characteristics were reinterpreted and transformed.

There are several explanations as to why the attitudes toward these destructive deities changed. The first deals with the native attitudes toward supernatural beings. According to early Shinto beliefs, deities are neither absolutely good nor absolutely evil. They, like mankind, have the potential to do good or bad things. It is the treatment they receive which determines their attitude. In the case of the *goryō*, prior treatment while alive caused the spirit to return in a malevolent form. Its character was determined by the

actions of others and its reciprocating resentment. However, after the proper placation had occurred, the spirit no longer held a grudge. It returned to the form of a neutral, ambivalent soul.

The people of the Heian era were much afraid of *goryō* and their powers. Simple placation and the continued state of ambivalence left the spirit with an opportunity to once again return to a harmful character. In order to prevent this, they made certain that the character was changed permanently into a benevolent being. This was done through the deification of *goryō*. The belief that a spirit's power could be used for good or evil propelled the enshrinement. The more powerful a *goryō*, the more imperative it was to make it a *kami*, thus channeling its power for the benefice of the people. In this way, many powerful political victims, such as emperors and high officials of state, such as Sugawara no Michizane, were given the status of a *kami*. From that time on, they were revered as protectors. Their ambivalent natures were almost permanently swung to the side of the good, as long as people continued their worship.

Another explanation concerning this transformation does not have so much to do with the attitudes of the people toward these spirits, but with the political leaders of the time. Herbert Plutschow suggests that the victims of political intrigues were used by the Fujiwara and other leaders to legitimize their rule and establish their power (2000). Disasters were said to be caused by the enemies of the leaders, and thus, when calamities stopped, those in power said it was because of their actions of supplicating and overcoming the evil enemies. Enshrining these victims then established the power of the rulers and made the deities into protectors of the state. The transformation was then

forced, brought upon by the governing class to control the way people viewed political leaders.

CONCLUSION

The *goryō* cult in Heian Period Japan was complex, intertwined in all manners of Japanese daily life: religion, art, politics, and social customs. As its influence spread, it exerted a strong force upon each of these areas and became often integral to them.

The idea of *goryō* developed from ancestor worship in native traditions and combined with the influx of language and folklore from mainland China to create an even stronger system of familial obligation to the ancestors. It drew on benevolent concepts of *uji* and *hito-gami* and added to them the daunting duty of keeping spirits from revealing their malevolent side. By transitioning the ancestors and *kami* from predominately positive beings to beings with a strong potential for destruction, *goryō* inspired the personification of natural disasters.

This personification was quickly taken up not as a singularly religious thing but as a means for political advancement and scapegoating. Emperors and counselors, such as the Fujiwara, used the belief in *goryō* for their own political ends. Prince Sawara's death and subsequent haunting was just the beginning of many years of a Fujiwara power struggle, supported by their reactions to political *goryō*. Sugawara Michizane's life and death brought the common people into the political scene through their connection to the

middle-class Udaijin. The extreme measures taken to pacify his spirit began his worship as one of the most popular *kami* in Japan.

Regardless of the method of appeasement, the placation of *goryō* not only put to rest the instigators of disaster and ceased disturbances but indirectly also promoted the growth of several new religious traditions. Superstition and the belief in vengeful spirits provided Onmyō-dō an opportunity to spread into the courts and the daily lives of the nobility. The practice of *nembutsu* gained popularity as it filled the need for commoners to ward off evil influences and subsequently gained a large following in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. Shugendō also gained constituents as its mountain magic was embraced by small villages in the countryside. More importantly, the cohabitation of these traditions promoted an open mind toward future emerging religious traditions.

The arts, too, were infused with new fervor by the belief in vengeful spirits. Stories needed retelling in song, dance, and literature to keep the dead in peace. Noh theatre and *biwa* recitals had their beginnings in the stories of the *goryō*. Festivals began elaborate celebrations of *goryō* rites, many still practiced today. The transformation of *goryō* from destructive spirits into benevolent protectors, moreover, created many of the well-known *kami* of Japan.

The age of the *goryō*, while filled with horrible disasters, brought about numerous positive changes. The influence of *goryō* on politics, art, and society dictated new ideas and customs. The examples, explanations, and stories noted here show the important role that *goryō* played in traditional Japan. A thorough study of Japanese history can not neglect such an influential phenomenon in the development of the traditions of Japan.

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