

Imagining China in Tokugawa Japan: Legends, Classics, and Historical Terms. By Wai-ming Ng. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019. Pp. xxvi + 262. \$85.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

In 2000, Wai-ming Ng contributed a pioneering survey of the intellectual and cultural influence of the *Yi jing* and divination in early modern Japan.¹ His present volume, a translation into English of a revised originally Chinese version,² broadens his enquiry to other cultural transmissions from China to Japan, again focusing on their reception in the Tokugawa 德川 period. The book explores how the Japanese adopted and reinterpreted, or, in Ng's terminology "localized," the topoi of Chinese history and literature to reflect their own very different experience. He surveys a wide range of topics encountered by Japanese over their long historical relationship with their great continental neighbour: the role of legendary individuals, canonical texts, moral values, and political concepts. The Japanese response to these transmissions constituted "building blocks," out of which was "forge[d] Japan's own thought and culture" (p. xiii). His approach is based on thorough bibliographical research and is primarily descriptive. It covers a wide variety of interesting religious, cultural, intellectual, and ideological phenomena, many of which will be fresh to English-language scholars and students of East Asian religion and intellectual history. This comprehensiveness will make the book absorbing reading for Anglophone students of East Asian culture.

Ng commands Chinese as well as the Japanese source material, so that the book has a valuable comparative aspect. Informing the text is, first, his central theme of "localization," understood both as "indigenization" or adaptive assimilation into Japanese culture as a whole and, more literally, as claimed or received by different locations within the Japanese archipelago. A second theme is the relative freedom of response to these Chinese transmissions. Several times, Ng refers to the "intellectual space" of Tokugawa Japan which allowed expression of a wide variety of views, not a few of which were mutually contradictory, controversial, or challenged the views prevalent among those in authority. The result is a book that, as the Ng claims, liberates from those conventional approaches to Japanese history that see Japanese cultural and intellectual history in the dichotomized categories such as "model and 'the other,' civilization and barbarism, and center and periphery" (p. 177) associated with contrasts between "China" and "Japan."

¹ *The I Ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

² Wu Weiming 吳偉明 (Wai-ming Ng), *Dechuan Riben de Zhongguo xiangxiang: Chuanshu, rudian ji cihui de zaidihua quanshi* 德川日本的中國想像：傳說、儒典及詞彙的在地化詮釋 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2015).

The three chapters of Part I, “Naturalization of Chinese Legends,” take up important legendary figures around whom colourful traditions have been created by the rich fantasizing of an insular people anxious to find human agency and connections with their continental neighbours. The Japanese imagination was exuberant. These figures were variously perceived. Confucians saw them mainly positively, as the source of moral teaching, political order, and technology. Among nativists their influence was deemed negative, injurious to self-respect and pristine native traditions, and demanding caution if not rejection. The opening account of Chapter 1, “Xu Fu as Chinese Migrant,” concerns a historically minor “court sorcerer who . . . escaped from the tyranny of the Qin Dynasty” (p. 3). In Japan, however, Xu became associated with a mission to bring thousands of boys and girls by boat across the sea east from China in search of paradise. Legends proclaimed that this boat made landfall in Japan and proliferated around Xu in both Japan and China. In Tokugawa times a “Xu Fu boom” blossomed (p. 4). “Localized” cults were formed linking Xu to “more than twenty places” (p. 12), as Ng sceptically remarks to “strengthen local economies by promoting tourism” (p. 13).

Even more startling were the traditions surrounding the subject of Chapter 2, “Yang Guifei as Shinto Deity.” Historically the consort of the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗, she was killed on his orders in 756 as his court fled from Chang’an in the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion. One Japanese version, however, had her escaping to Japan as a refugee, only to die after arriving; another that she was in fact an embodiment of the protective Shinto deity Atsuta Myōjin 熱田明神, who flew to Tang China in order to disrupt the Chinese polity and so frustrate the plans of the emperor to invade Japan. With Chapter 3, “Wu Taibo [吳太伯] as Imperial Ancestor,” Ng’s third legendary figure, a sagely prince of high Chinese antiquity, the story may become a little more familiar to students of Tokugawa thought. Wu was controversially identified by some Confucians, blasphemously in some other views, as the founder of the Japanese imperial lineage. Here Ng supplies a welcome account of the controversies surrounding this Chinese sage more comprehensive than hitherto available to Anglophone students.

Part II, “Appropriation of Confucian Classics,” covers canonical Confucian texts. Chapter 4, “The *Mencius* and Politics,” is devoted to the canonical text, problematic because, though an invaluable source of wisdom on morality, agronomy, finance, and much else, it contains an account legitimating dynastic change, a concept provocative to many Japanese ideologues. Ng’s account dwells particularly on the interpretation of the imperial loyalist Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰, who used the text as a flimsy point of departure for his own nationalist and imperial loyalist thinking. As Ng puts it: “the *Mencius* was remade in Japan” (p. 90).

In Chapter 5, “The *Xiaojing* and Ethics,” on the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Ng takes up the ancient casuistical problems concerning the relationship between familial and political or military values. He seeks to refine the widely advanced view that Japanese systematically reversed the Chinese preference for filial piety over loyalty. His chief exemplar is the early Tokugawa-period Confucian philosopher, Nakae Tōju 中江藤樹, for whom filial piety was both a cosmic and existential principle and a practical imperative. While he concedes that in later warrior thought and in Bakumatsu 幕末 and Meiji 明治 ideology, loyalty did indeed command priority among moral imperatives, he adduces good evidence that filial piety was a dominant value, certainly among commoners, for much of the period. He might have added that Confucian filial piety was enlisted as the chief cause for Confucian apologists in their anti-Buddhist polemics. For Confucians, Buddhist cremation of dead parents’ bodies was viewed with particular abhorrence.

In Chapter 6, “The *Yijing* and Shinto,” Ng returns to the Japanese take on Chinese divination. After briefly surveying early *Kokugaku* 国学 (Nativist school) rejection of the most widely accepted text, the *Zhouyi*, he turns to the what he admits to be the “bizarre and far-fetched” (p. 120) reinterpretation of Chinese divination and geomancy by the nativist thinker Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 and his followers. His learned and lucid unravelling of Hirata’s radically revisionist view of the traditions of Chinese divination shows how he “modified, naturalized, and appropriated [Chinese teaching concerning divination] to advocate nativist ideas” (p. 120). Hirata rejected the *Zhouyi*, canonical for most scholars, as “corrupt” (p. 120) in favour of the obscure, purportedly earlier, but conveniently largely lost *Lianshan* 連山 and *Guicang* 歸藏 ancient Chinese divination texts. He made the startling claim that the Chinese culture heroes were in fact Shinto deities who went to China as missionaries of morality to the uncivilized Chinese. One of the most important of these figures, Fu Xi 伏羲, Hirata claimed, was in fact the Shinto god Ōmononushi-no-Kami 大物主神 who “went [to China] for a short period,” invented divination, and taught “its foolish people the ways of heaven, earth, and humanity” (p. 113).

In Part III, “Definition of Historical Terms,” Ng turns from legends and texts to concepts and terminology. Chapter 7, “Names for China,” is devoted to a survey of Japanese names, but also reciprocally touches on Chinese traditions concerning Japan. Though this section of the book discusses concepts that are perforce more familiar to researchers on Japanese cultural, political, and ideological history, once more the author’s command of sources and sense of the variety of opinions makes his account well worth study. Nothing better illustrates the historically fraught relationship between the two countries, or better illustrates the problem of self-estimate of a culturally client archipelago in the face of a mighty continental imperium. This chapter is a romp through the catalogue by which Japanese referred to themselves and

to China. It would be diverting, perhaps like an unbalanced sibling rivalry, were it not for the poignant fact that real relationships were involved that would eventually find expression in tragic conflict. Chapter 9, “Redefining legitimacy,” concentrates on the vexed problem of Japan’s fourteenth-century dynastic schism between rival imperial courts. It illustrates effectively the “indigenization” of Chinese concepts of legitimacy, for here the possession of physical regalia, foreign to China, but skilfully collated and “localized” with superficially Chinese moral symbolism, is used in a uniquely Japanese tradition to claim or reinforce dynastic legitimacy.

It may seem mean-spirited to end the review of this engaging book with a quibble. It is, however, a commonplace that metaphors cannot usually be pursued beyond a certain point. The concept of “building blocks” serves well the purpose of illustrating the range of discrete heterogeneous and nuanced Chinese topoi concerning national or cultural identity refashioned within the broader Tokugawa-period world of thought. But the metaphor is less successful in conveying the historical meaning of the overall volatile nature of what it surveys. Blocks are implicitly an element in a coherent structure. But, as Ng effectively points out, his blocks were variously and irregularly shaped. Moreover, they were sited in such way that they could point in “different directions” (p. 67). Teleologically, what, if any, edifice did they assemble and bequeath? Ng does mention a “state ideology,” but is also, refreshingly, at pains to emphasize the “intellectual space” within the world of Tokugawa thought to accommodate his many heterogeneous views and nuances (p. 104). That insight will be one of his chief contributions to the too often over-determined dichotomization of Tokugawa thought. As Japan emerged into participation in the world order, however, the legacy of Tokugawa thought remains an important teleological question. But Ng’s concerns and method are topical rather than diachronically narrative, and this theme lies largely outside the scope of his study. It is, however, encouraging that his book inspires the question.

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