

# Ethics in Myth and History

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**Abstract** Different from the Chinese or Koreans, the Japanese have not cut themselves off the ancient mythology. Their system of the emperor shows it. However, the modern civilization tries to give priority to history so that there is little room for them to keep the mythology safe and sound. One of the outcomes of the situation is the nationalistic ideology of the divine nation with the divine emperor invented out of the ancient mythology. It failed of course with the national defeat at the end of World War II, but this does not mean the end of the mythical mind of the Japanese. Since Antiquity till today, the Japanese have had a mythical vision of the world based on the idea of Natural productivity. According to the vision, a human product called history is nothing compared to the productivity of Nature. The Japanese ethics is not based on a historical vision but on a naturalistic vision, which differs them from the ethics of the so-called civilized peoples.

**Key words** myth; history; ideology; nature

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## I

China excluded myth from history quite early, which differs from Korea, much more from Japan that tried to include myth in history. In the fundamental book that determined posterior historical books in China, Shima Qian's *Shiji*, written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., we do not find anything mythical. We find instead the author's strong will to narrate the history as he thought to be real. Loyalty to the facts is what he must have imposed on himself in writing the history.

As for Korea, we find the myths of foundation of the three ancient kingdoms in *Sam-guk Sagi*, the first Korean historical document compiled in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but this does not mean the compilers considered the myths as the sources that showed the origin of Korea. They recorded them just as references.

By contrast, the first Japanese historical book, *Nihon Shoki*, compiled in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, starts the historical narrative with a series of myths about the birth of the country and that became the model for the posterior books of history. History and myth were mixed up there, which became the characteristic of the national history.

As for the modern Japan, we have to say the Japanese are still keeping the mythical vision of their nation that we find in the book of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Even though they have hardly any consciousness of it, they keep it at the bottom of their heart.

You may wonder how a modern Japanese, in the age of science, still keeps it. To answer the question, suffice it to remember that the political ideology of modern Japan as a divine nation was a succession of the abovementioned ancient myth and that it is that ideology that propelled the Japanese to carry on a series of wars. It is certain that after the war, after the national defeat in 1945, the Japanese had to abandon the ideology, but this does not mean they abandoned the myth as well. The myth is still there, if not in their consciousness, at least in their unconscious.

Now, the main story of the myth we find in abovementioned *Nihon Shoki* is that a divine being descended from Heaven to the land and became the ancestor of the emperors who would preside the land. The myth was obviously made to prove the divine nature of all the emperors and the land called Japan, and has been received by people till today as an important heritage. As I told you above, the modern Japanese may not believe in it, and yet they would not leave it. They continue to hold it in mind as the very source of their national identity even though they would not accept it openly.

As a modern people, they can tell historical facts from mythological stories. However, they would never chase them out of mind; they would rather reject historical facts if these could disturb their mythological vision. Seeing this, I would say the Japanese are a mythical people to whom myth is more important than history.

Mori Ogai, a modern writer who studied medicine and hygiene in Germany, exposed the problem of myth versus history in a short novel titled "*As if*" (1912). The solution he proposed in it is the following: "You had better act as if you believed in the myth" (101). Perhaps many of the modern Japanese think and act like that. Rationally, they do not believe in the myth, but they do support it

emotionally.

Now, how about the Westerners? Do they have any myth? It is said myth was excluded from history quite early in the West. In ancient Greek, one of the first philosophers, Thales of Miletus, said that the world was full of gods. He started from this mythical vision and got to a non-mythical conclusion, that is “The world is made of only one element: water”(Aristotle 983). His path from myth to science shows the intellectual jump that opened a new horizon to the West.

Thales, the Father of science, was born in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. In a similar way as he, Herodotus, born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC., became the Father of history. With him, the ancient Greek and the posterity in the West left their mythology for history. He was the first to establish a historical narrative with a critical approach to the sources. He defined history as a record loyal to the facts of “human events;” he allowed no mythology in there. History as a narrative of the true was thus born; myth was left behind as a dead body.

However, we should not forget the presence of another tradition in the West, the Jewish one. The Jews are a people who have tried to keep myth as the starting point of history. Cecil Roth, a British historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said the following about it: “If a people have cherished a man in mind for more than 2,000 years as a hero of their history, he should be viewed at least as an emotional reality that has a historical value” (Roth 15). This statement of his indicates that myth cannot always be excluded from history. If the Jew history began with certain amount of mythology, we can say that the Japanese are not the unique people in the world who would not like to chase out the ancient mythology from history.

## II

Now, I pose a question to myself. Is a mythical mind ethical or not? Is it less ethical than a historical one? I pose this question because I know a myth under a certain historical circumstance becomes a dangerous ideology. That happened in Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as you know and in Japan as well. Such a dangerous ideology can never be ethical.

From a historical point of view, a myth is anti-ethical because it contains a lie; it is disloyal to facts. From a mythical point of view, a myth is not a myth but truth so that it is not anti-ethical. To be more precise, an ethical judgment is not adequate for a myth. For it is before the good or the evil, before the true or the false.

The question was already discussed in Ancient Greek. Plato tried to exclude poetry from his Republic, judging it as a sort of myths, a sort of untrue stories. Aristotle to the contrary defended myths as a form of poetry, metaphors capable of

evoking truth. Myths were not unethical to him; they could be sources of ethics. I am for Aristotle more than Plato.

I know modernity is anti-mythical. Modern people consider myths untrue, therefore unethical. They believe in history and support the belief that is correlated to another belief, the belief in positive science. In the name of science, they reject myths.

However, is history really true? It certainly tries to be so, but isn't there any myth in it? For history is not completely exterior to us like a stone on a street. It is within us. We are human, having subjectivity. Isn't history a product of subjectivity?

"History is a modern myth," said Claude Levi-Strauss who studied the myths of the world systematically(303). "History is a myth," said Kobayashi Hideo, a modern critic(14). The argument the Japanese critic developed is that a history is a story that one narrates, using memory, imagination and some material. Kobayashi did not see much difference between a novel and a history.

As for historians who write history, they begin to recognize that history is a narrative, that historians compose a narrative, choosing and combining pieces of material they call 'facts.' Their actual position is approaching Levi-Strauss and Kobayashi.

Karl Popper, a British philosopher, criticized historians who believed in "historical truth." He argued that history could not be a science because differently from natural sciences, it could not be tested empirically. He concluded there was no establishing a historical law comparable to a law of physics and added that it was dangerous to believe in history as a science(36). Let us remember he was one of the Jews who escaped from the menace of Nazism based on that kind of belief.

Abovementioned Levi-Strauss, another Jew contemporary to Popper, tried to attack historicism by defending a genuine mythical mind that he found among so-called primitive peoples. To him, a mythical ideology is not a genuine myth but a distortion of it. He claimed that a human mind is basically mythical and that all humanity should be loyal to the genuine mythical mind instead of clinging to a mythical ideology that modernity has invented. He also warned that we should not cling to history because it is no more than a myth commonly accepted in Modern Age.

### III

The reason why a genuine myth becomes an ideology is not difficult to see. Levi-Strauss said that a myth tends to become an ideology when it encounters another

myth that comes from another society. An encounter of a myth with another is certainly a historical event that takes place between societies facing each other, and the encounter of different myths disturb the established order of society supported by them. A myth needs to be absolutely true and the encounter of two different myths relativizes their value.

This explains why the modern Japan had to invent an ideology composed of elements from the ancient myth. By encountering a scientific and historical myth of the West, the Japanese were puzzled so much so that they lost confidence in theirs. Entering in the Modern Age, they hastily made up a national ideology, which did nothing but leading them to irrationality. It was a real tragic path.

This said, I have to mention a very important fact concerning the Japanese mind. The Japanese have a genuine mythical mind as well. There is a constant presence of a vitalistic vision in them. This vision that can be found in the oldest book in Japan titled *Kojiki* compiled a little earlier than the abovementioned *Nihon Shoki*, has nothing nationalistic; it has nothing to do with politics.

The vision I am referring to offers an open and tolerant attitude toward everything. It gives a relativistic vision as well. For it consists in viewing everything, every single phenomenon, as a divine and sacred being because it is a part of the general divinity representing vitality. The vitality was called “musuhi” in antiquity, which meant the “spirit of procreation.” To the ancient Japanese, the world and its millions of phenomena were fruit of the divine act of coupling and procreation. That vision of the ancient has been succeeded from generation to generation and even today’s Japanese keep it at the bottom of their mind, even if unconsciously.

#### IV

My theme is ethics in myth and history. Which of them is more ethical? I cannot tell. Myth can be good when it is genuine. History can be good so long as it accepts itself to be a story. Anyway, they are not the same. The latter tries to be loyal to facts where as the former flies away with imagination. When history dominates our mind, myth turns to be poetry.

Talking of poetry, I remember poetry can give a better answer to the question of myth versus history. Myth and history are eternal enemies that try to chase out each other, for sure. But we have poetry that enters the battlefield of the two to make peace.

I would like to present the Japanese solution for the question of myth versus history. The solution has been given by poets precisely. Poets are not believers in

myths. They know every myth has its end and is to be replaced by history, but they do not become believers in history.

The solution the Japanese poets find is in Nature. They found Nature as an eternal solvent that solves the conflict between them. They know Nature is above everything. Neither myth nor history can be above Her. Let me quote a piece of poetry that shows it:

Oh, Vines creeping on the Divine Walls of a Shrine,  
You have also changed the color  
Unable to overcome the overwhelming autumn.(Saeki 77)

This poem of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, collected in the first imperial anthology *Kokin*, shows clearly the impossibility for the divine to overcome the change of seasons presented by Nature. It indicates the victory of Nature over myths. Nature is represented as a superpower capable of changing even a shrine and its divine walls. Myth is over; Nature is always there. That is the message of the poem.

You may say the problem of myth versus history is not treated there. It appears when history weighs more, when poets begin to consider it. Here is an example of the answer given by a famous poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Basho.

Oh, Green Grass of Summer!  
The Dreams of the Warriors  
Are all gone away! (84)

Basho, the master of haiku in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, tells us that the “warriors” that represent a war, a historical event, has no trace any more and the only thing left is “Green Grass of Summer” that is eternally present. The implication of the poem is easy to see. Nature overwhelms history; history is nothing in front of Nature; Nature is above history.

Considering this poem and the one I quoted earlier from the anthology *Kokin*, I conclude that a traditional Japanese vision on history is Naturalist. By “naturalist,” I mean a vision that gives priority to Nature. In this vision, neither myth nor history can overcome Nature so that one should obey Nature above all.

The last question that I pose is if this naturalism is ethical?

I would say “yes” because we humans are a part of Nature and that we cannot go beyond.

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