

## **Response to Yijiang Zhong, “Month without the Gods: Shinto and Authority in Early Modern Japan.”**

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This is a suggestive paper in its reconsideration of the process of the establishment of modern Shinto. It has been generally understood that Shinto is the national religion of Japan. Yijiang Zhong, however, calls into question this reified notion of Shinto. He starts from the postmodern perspective that there is no ahistorical entity of Shinto and uses a hermeneutic approach to pursue the changing process of Shinto in history. There were several major shifts in the dominant thought of the Izumo Shinto: from Buddhism first to the Confucianism of Hayashi Razan during the transition from the medieval period to the early modern period, then to the Nativism of Hirata Atsutane at the end of the early modern period.

Zhong demonstrates that in the late eighteenth-century, activities of the traveling preachers of the Izumo Shrine popularized its god Okuninushi (Great Lord of the Japanese Land) all over Japan. They used several preaching strategies but in particular they conflated Okuninushi with Daikokuten (Mahākāla), or “The God of Fortune,” whose origin goes back to ancient India. This was an epoch-making period for the Izumo Shrine because it attempted to establish Shinto as a national religion through the popularization process of the Izumo Shinto, which was previously worshiped by a ruling class of the Izumo region. In general, I agree with Zhong that the national character of Shinto was invented in the early modern period. I also side completely with Zhong in making the point that Shinto of this period was not a religion in the Western sense. The contemporary concept of religion in Japan was imported from the West—modeled after Protestantism—at the beginning of the modern period, when Japan was forced to open her country to the West. At that time, the notion of religion appeared in Japan together with that of the modern nation. In order to unify the people across the Japanese archipelago into an imagined nation, Japanese politicians and conservative intellectuals of the time utilized Shinto as the dominant ideology, first in the form of public religion and then as public profane morality, i.e., not a religion as defined in the Protestant

sense.

Thanks to Zhong, it also becomes clear that the national nature of Shinto was not only invented by native elites in the modern period but also constructed in the early modern period from the bottom up by common people, not because of the influence of the Western notion of the nation, but because the Izumo Shrine wanted to expand Shinto to be a folk religion. We should be aware of both discontinuity and continuity in the transition from the early modern to the modern periods if we want to better appreciate Zhong's analysis of the popular formation of Izumo Shinto.

Furthermore, Zhong's paper reveals the reemergence of the relationship of Okuninushi with Amaterasu, the ancestor goddess of the imperial house, in the early modern period, more specifically in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this relationship, Okuninushi was the former lord of the land of Japan who surrendered the land to the new ruler, i.e., the descendants of Amaterasu. Zhong seems to suggest that before this period, Okuninushi had been unrelated to Amaterasu, namely as the god of the Izumo region, which remained largely independent from the cultural and political power of the imperial court. On this relationship, I want to make a different point. Prior to this period, Izumo already had a close relationship with the imperial court, even though it was not a simple relationship of forced political obedience. In the eighth-century text *Nihon shoki*, Okuninushi was described as a relative of Amaterasu, being the son of the latter's younger brother, Susano. The general mass may not have known this relationship, but the elite knew it because of their knowledge of *Nihon shoki*. This is a significant question for further exploration: why did the cultural authority of the imperial house attract the attention of some ruling and elite groups even after the imperial house had lost its political power since the end of the ancient period?

Lastly, I would complement this paper with a statement about Okuninushi in the modern period. Between 1880 and 1881, there was a huge debate with regard to the theological status of Okuninushi between the Izumo School, which argued that the Japanese government should enshrine Okuninushi as well as Amaterasu as the founders of the world, and the Ise School, which refused to include Okuninushi as a founder. The Izumo School was influenced by the early modern Nativism of Hirata Atsutane, whom Zhong mentioned in passing at the end of his paper. Eventually, Okuninushi

was excluded from the officially legitimated dogma of State Shinto—a dogma approved by the Meiji emperor. Till the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945, this official dogma was maintained by the Japanese government in the metropole. But in the colonies of the Japanese empire, including the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, Sakhalin and Hokkaido, Okuninushi was worshiped together with Amaterasu in Shinto shrines sponsored by the Japanese government. At these shrines Japanese officials and Shinto priests worshiped Okuninushi as the representative spirit of the people colonized by the Japanese. On the one hand, they felt the need to console the spirits of the conquered people; on the other hand, they utilized the logic, signified by Okuninushi's surrender of the land, that people subject to colonization should voluntarily submit their lands to the Japanese emperor. Here, the Izumo Shinto, in particular the legend of Okuninushi's surrender, was appropriated for colonialism in a context different from the early modern period, although on the surface the worshiping of Okuninushi in colonies seemed to be a revival of early modern Izumo Shinto.

From Zhong's analysis in the paper, we should reach the conclusion that Shinto was not an ahistorical national religion. Nowadays, few Japanese, including conservative Shinto scholars and priests, would insist on Shinto's ahistorical nature, but they obviously want to suggest that Shinto is the national religion of Japan. But the notions of religion and nation themselves are problematic terminologies. They are unique to modernity and never existed in early modern Japanese society. Still, not only many Shinto priests and scholars in Japan, but also non-Japanese scholars sponsored financially by Shinto organizations in Japan, argue that the imperial Shinto during the war period was a temporary deviation from the national character of Shinto. This argument is meant to serve the goal of postwar Shinto supporters to establish it as a national religion. But we have to examine seriously the war-time desire of imperial Shinto to be a world religion in order to relativize the historical characters of postwar Japan as a nation-state.