

## The Development of “Popular” Izumo vs. “Authoritarian” Ise

In modern Japan before 1945, the idea that the emperor was descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu legitimized imperial rule; Amaterasu’s shrine at Ise occupied the apex of a state-supported hierarchy of Shinto shrines. Since the war, Ise has maintained a dominant position in the Shinto world, still linked closely in the minds of many supporters and critics to the imperial family and, often by extension, to the nationalist, imperialist, or authoritarian policies of the prewar government.

In opposition to Ise’s imperial legacy, some critics of the Japanese establishment have found in Izumo Shrine a powerful symbol of popular, rather than imperial, sovereignty – or religious, rather than political, authority. If modern Japan had adopted an orthodoxy focused on Izumo instead of Ise, imply Hara Takeshi and others, popular sovereignty and democracy might have emerged earlier, and the authoritarian violence that led to Japan’s defeat might never have happened.

In this delightful and very helpful essay, Yijiang Zhong explores a question important to challengers to existing regimes throughout the world: How can people effectively legitimize opposition to authoritarian regimes? Specifically, how did the priests of Izumo develop a deity and doctrines for their shrine that could eventually pose a challenge to the top-down policies and emperor-supporting Shinto orthodoxy of the modern Japanese state? Zhong’s answer focuses on three dynamics: the widespread development of a new, nativist view of the past based on ancient texts and the deities they mention; the financial exigencies that gave rise to competition and innovation among priests and their shrines; and the impact of popular ideas and desires on the

proselytizing doctrines and strategies that priests and their allies developed to raise necessary funds. While the general outline of Zhong's narrative is not new, his exploration of Izumo in this way is groundbreaking. Moreover, Zhong's emphasis on the sheer extent of the influence of folk ideas is particularly noteworthy.

Zhong's approach fits squarely within the methodology of recent studies of Shinto, which have worked to historicize a Shinto tradition that proponents have portrayed as the timeless, unchanging essence of the Japanese nation. In showing how the priests of Izumo deliberately developed new doctrines and rituals in the midst of both financial pressures and intra- and inter-shrine competition, Zhong clearly contributes to this contextually-sensitive narrative of Shinto in history. Contrary to the overwhelming bulk of ahistorical scholarship on Izumo, Zhong shows that the idea of the "Godless Month" was not always linked with the shrine, nor was Ōkuninushi always identified with the fortune god Daikoku. Rather, proponents and proselytizers developed both associations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The early modern development of these associations is not surprising – but Zhong is the first to rigorously unearth this history. Zhong's findings, then, contribute significantly to a narrative that is emerging from recent scholarship on Shinto: rather than a narrative of natural, ancient, indigenous practices surviving until today, we now see Shinto's history as a much more contingent, multi-dimensional process, full of conflict, competition, and politics. We have a new picture of Japanese religion as dynamic, fully embedded in its changing historical contexts. This new narrative is important because of national politics: it shows that the still dominant popular perception of an unchanging, natural Shinto was, in fact, created and reinforced by human beings for particular purposes at particular times – which means that it can be changed again.

The two most provocative aspects of Zhong's argument – the emergence of Izumo as a challenge to Ise and the importance of popular influence on Izumo's doctrines – also raise the most challenging questions. First, how deliberately were the priests of Izumo fashioning a challenge to Ise? Zhong writes that Ōkuninushi “challenged and compromised the authority of the imperial ancestor the Sun Goddess in the early modern and Meiji periods”(p. 1). He continues, “The nation-wide popularization of Ōkuninushi as the god of creation, blessing and fortune . . . consolidated a form of cultural authority that was articulated vis-à-vis and in displacement of that of the imperial house” (p. 2). But, before the nineteenth century, how established was the authority of Ise and the imperial house? Certainly, before the mid-nineteenth century, the Tokugawa shoguns eclipsed the emperors, and Ise was not the center of an imperial orthodoxy. Rather, Ise's proponents, like Izumo's, were spreading throughout the country attempting to drum up business for their pilgrimage. In order to understand the development of Izumo as an oppositional center, then, we would need to explore how Ise and Izumo developed alongside, and in conversation with, each other. How did Ise's growing dominance in the pilgrimage business, for instance, influence promoters' shaping of Izumo's image?

Second, as historians have consistently realized, the search for popular influence brings scholars up against a thorny problem: sources. Zhong's evidence of popular influence in this essay is at times tantalizingly thin. Since he often cites only one instance – say, of a Noh play or a *kyōgen* script – for each point he makes, the question arises of how “popular” such cultural statements were. For instance, who *wrote* those scripts? Were the authors associated with the Izumo priests in any way? What is the logic for considering these plays to be evidence of “folk” thought? Does it matter whether some of the amulets presented were products of Izumo Shrine or

not? Were there personal, regional, or other connections between the various creators of these images?

Overall, Zhong's history of the Izumo priests' doctrinal strategies is extremely valuable. By contributing to our historical understanding of one of the most important shrines in modern Japan, it adds to our emerging, historically-sensitive picture of the development of Shinto in institutional, ritual, and doctrinal terms. It highlights the role of financial and institutional challenges in the development of doctrine.

Most importantly, though, Zhong's emphasis on the impact of popular thought on the development of one shrine's doctrines helps explain the persistence of the image of an ahistorical, naïve vision of Shinto. One of the reasons why Shinto has been such an effective force is because intellectuals and government ideologues have long presented it as innocent and natural. Zhong's analysis suggests that, in part, this idea of a "naïve" Shinto caught on so well because priests adopted and adapted preexisting folk ideas, suggesting popular origins for the shrine lost in time. Such popular ideas, deliberately refocused by proponents to support Izumo Shrine, could then later legitimize Izumo as a principled, popular alternative to imperial Ise and its allies.