

Takashi Katsumata 勝俣隆. *Constellation Legendry in Japanese Mythology* 『星座で読み解く日本神話』 (*Seiza de Yomitoku Nihon Shinwa*) 4th ed. Tokyo: Taishūkan, 2010. 293 pp. (Japanese, and under the translation in English).

It is perceived as general knowledge that there is no constellation mythology in Japan. This classical belief emanates from the fact that there are hardly any words about stars in the sky in Japanese legendry as mentioned in the *Kojiki* (『古事記』 *Records of Ancient Matters*, 712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (『日本書紀』 *The Oldest Chronicles of Japan*, 720). When asked why Japanese mythology has so few references to stars, some typical explanations are tendered by Japanese scholars. Unlike nomads who rely on stars for directions, the ancient Japanese were an agricultural people and, thus, were not concerned with the stars. The Japanese wanted to sleep early, and actually slept early, because of their exhaustion from farm work in the daytime and, hence, they did not care about the stars. The ancient Japanese were afraid of evil spirits in the dark sky of night, and, thus, were not inclined to deify stars like the Greeks or to find in them the opportunity to study the astronomical almanac like the Chinese. The unclear air due to the humidity of the climate of Japan hindered people from clearly seeing stars in the night sky. In reality, these observations cannot explain the existence of various dialects and traditions relating to stars all over Japan, which proves that the ancient Japanese were definitely interested in the stars. Thus, it is too facile to say that there is no constellation legendry in Japan, even if there are almost no words in Japanese mythology that literally and directly refer to the stars in the sky.

After these remarks in the early chapters of his book *Constellation Legendry in Japanese Mythology*, the author Takashi Katsumata begins developing his argument in favor of the existence of constellation mythology in Japan. For this denial of the accepted dogma, Katsumata does not naively insist on his imagination. Instead, he provides the reader with varied evidence from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* and effects comparisons of accounts available in the ancient texts and traditions of the East and the West including the Greek, Roman, Babylonian, Egyptian, Arabian, Indian, and Chinese folklore. In a sense, Katsumata's *Constellation Legendry in Japanese Mythology* is a work that equals the Copernican revolution in the research of Japanese traditions and the constellation mythology of Japan. Just as other mythologies have a supreme god or goddess, the Japanese mythology mentioned in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* also depicts the supreme god Izanagi-no-ōmikami (伊邪那岐大御神), a symbol

of heaven (天). The mythology begins with the manner in which Izanagi created the world, or Japan. According to the legend, Izanagi (天) went right and Izanami-no-mikoto (伊邪那美命), the goddess who symbolized earth (地), went left around “Ten-no-onbashira” (天の御柱), or the pole of heaven. They met each other and, subsequently, two goddesses and a god were born: the goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami (天照大御神), the Japanese goddess of the sun, was born from Izanagi’s left eye; Tsukuyomi-no-mikoto (月読命), the Japanese goddess of the moon, emerged from his right eye; and Susanoo-no-mikoto (須佐之大命), the god of violent wind and thunder, materialized from his nostril. Even modern people can easily imagine this visual. After the goddesses and the god were brought into being, Amaterasu made her offspring descend from heaven to the earth. That is the theme and plot of the Japanese myth. Thus, gods in Japanese mythology, as Katsumata points out, do relate to the stars and must depict a tale of constellations, just like the legendry in other areas.

To effect his clarification, Katsumata quotes texts from the East and the West and makes them illuminate each other. In addition, he carefully interprets the etymology of ancient Japanese words with detailed explanation. For example, Katsumata explains that the word “subaru” (昴), the Japanese name for the Pleiades star cluster, originally meant “to gather together in one place” and elucidates that the word can be found as a metaphor for “a necklace” in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*. Furthermore, according to Katsumata, the concept of the eyes of heaven, or of a god, can be observed in the mythologies of various cultures. As mentioned earlier, Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, is the left eye of Izanagi: thus, she is an eye of heaven in Japanese myth. In Indonesian mythology, “matahari” means the sun and also simultaneously denotes the eye of heaven. Regarding the pole of heaven, Katsumata takes several examples from old texts and traditions in other cultures. One of them is an ancient Chinese manuscript, the *Dong fang shuo shen yi xing* (《東方朔神異形》). It says, “In the area of Mt. Kunlun (崑崙) there is a copper pole tall enough to reach heaven. This shaft is called ‘the pole of heaven’ (天柱).” This location implies that the house of the king of heaven is above Mount Kunlun, located at the center of the world. In other words, the ancient Chinese text identifies the house of the king of heaven with the pole star. This kind of identification can be confirmed in other mythologies. Referring to Mircea Eliade, Katsumata points out that Indonesians believe that the great mountain Gunung Semeru is located at the center of the world and that the pole star is above the mountain. In addition, the conviction that

the pole star is above a high mountain that is regarded to be the center of the world and that a tall pole supports heaven and the house of the king, or the pole star, is prevalent especially in the Eurasian region. Thus, Katsumata concludes that the pole of heaven in Japanese mythology can also be regarded as the pole star, and there resides Izanagi, the supreme god.

Using etymology and associations with the mythologies of other cultures, Katsumata reads the Japanese constellation legend recounted in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* and finally demonstrates to us the map of the constellations. Let me refer to several examples. The Lucifer as Venus in Greece and “taibai” (太白) or a mountain hermit in China can be identified with an evil god Amanokakaseo (天香香背男) in Japan. A set of small stars of the Orion as a knife in Greece and “fa” (伐), or cutting a tree in China can be recognized as the edge of the band of the clothes worn by Amanouzume-no-mikoto (天宇受売命), a goddess of female attendants. The Orion as the Orion in Greece and a turtle, a white tiger, and a goddess in China be associated with Amanouzume-no-mikoto herself. The Lactic Way as the milky way of Hera’s breast milk in Greece and the Chinese “tianhan” (天漢), or a river in the sky made of the water of the Han River that flew up may be equated to Michinonagachiha-no-kami (道之長乳母神), the goddess of nannies, who was born from the band Izanagi wears and is the metaphor for a long way from the hell. The Hyades as the head of an ox or Hyades in Greece and “bixing” (畢星), or eight kids in China may be connected with the Japanese god Sarutapiko-no-kami (猿田毘古神), whose face is like a monkey with a long nose.

Katsumata surprises the reader by finding not only the existence of a constellation mythology in Japan but also by affirming the affinity between the traditions of constellation legendry in the East and the West. At the same time, he does not forget to highlight the differences in the constellations in the East and the West. The biggest distinction lies in the gender of the deities: the Greek and Japanese myths assign the constellations genders that are opposite to each other.

The sun goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami, or Izanagi’s left eye, is regarded as the Imperial ancestor in Japan. Japanese mythology is primarily about Amaterasu’s sending her offspring to the earth and, hence, the mythology creates a hierarchy of gods and simultaneously legitimates the rule of the Japanese emperor on the earth. This divine right to rule is similar to the body politic in both the East and the West, as expressed, for example, in the writings by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) and John of Salisbury. Though Katsumata does not mention politics in his book, his work reminds us of the tendency of civilizations to use mythology to

legitimize a ruler. With such thought-provoking content, Katsumata's book *Constellation Legendry in Japanese Mythology* certainly broadens the horizon and perspective of people around the world and contributes to the discipline of East-West Studies. Just for this reason, everyone should read this fascinating book. The text is written in Japanese; however, Katsumata's book is being translated into English. Soon the book will be accessible to people across the globe.

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