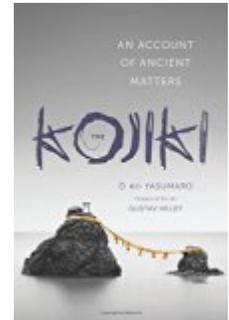




Ō no Yasumaro. *The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters*. Translated by Gustav Heldt. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$27.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-16389-7.



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Gustav Heldt brings an innovative approach to his English-language translation of the *Kojiki* (712), Japan's oldest extant narrative text, and one of paramount cultural significance for its mythic accounts of the origins of Japan and its early rulers, as well as its wondrous accounts of wooing and rivalries enacted in song and trickery. In his introduction to the translation, Heldt observes that the *Kojiki* has often been regarded as a "simple or primitive work" due to its "relative antiquity." He believes the *Kojiki* to be, on the contrary, "the sophisticated product of a highly literate society." With that conviction in mind, Heldt's intended goal with this new translation is "to convey something of its descriptive appeal, evocative power, and narrative crafting" (p. xiii). Heldt adopts a number of strategies in order to accomplish this goal, and in so doing, succeeds admirably.

Heldt's translation is highly accurate in terms of being a reliable reflection of the sense of the original text. As he notes in his introduction, the original text of the *Kojiki* has always been open to

different interpretations depending on the reader. This is due to the fact that the bulk of the text is written in hybrid *kanbun*, which follows more or less the grammar and style of Classical Chinese. A tradition of reading the text as Japanese, by reading nouns and verbs with their corresponding Japanese equivalents, and assigning grammatical and inflectional particles to correspond to the grammar of Japanese, has been in place ever since Motoori Norinaga assigned such a reading to the entire text in the late eighteenth century. Thus, both intralingual and interlingual translations may differ in small ways depending on how the Japanese reading has been assigned. The most recent translation into English prior to that of Heldt was that of Donald L. Philippi in 1968, nearly fifty years ago. It, too, was a highly accurate reflection of the Japanese reading of this text. What, then, does Heldt bring to his new translation that distinguishes it from others, and merits a fresh look?

To begin with, Heldt regards Ō no Yasumaro (d. 723) as the *author* of the *Kojiki*, and not its

compiler-editor, as is commonly the case. Perhaps that has allowed him to envision a structure for the work that subdivides the only divisions in the extant manuscripts, those of books 1, 2, and 3, into individual chapters named according to the particular “spirits” and rulers whose stories each relates. While Heldt characterizes this strategy as that of the “scholarly convention,” most Japanese editions as well as other translations into English create smaller subsections within those larger chapters. Heldt has opted to separate the different tales and anecdotes under a particular sovereign not with headers, but with simple text dividers. This lends a cohesiveness to each chapter that propels the reader along.

The greatest departure from previous English-language translations is Heldt’s decision to translate all of the names in the *Kojiki*. In fact, he foregrounds this innovative strategy at the beginning of his introduction. The reason he offers has to do with the fact that the *Kojiki* narrates “ancient matters,” many of which are accounts of how a person or place came to be accorded their name, or presents a name that is reflective of some quality of the person or place in question. In a time when speech and song were believed to have magical efficacy, words were used with care and precision. Heldt’s intent is to convey some of this power of words, and evoke their resonance by making the sense of names transparent. In contrast, Basil Hall Chamberlain, in his much earlier rendition into English, translated only the names of the “persons, whether divine or human” in book 1, and almost none of the place names.[1] In the remaining two books of Chamberlain’s translation, all names are transliterated. Chamberlain also footnotes all names, providing the Japanese original in the case where the names are rendered into English, or the English translation, in the case where the Japanese names are transliterated. Heldt, preferring a clean and nondistracting rhythm to his translated text, opts to provide glossaries rather than foot- or endnotes. Accordingly, Heldt includes three glossaries: “Glossary of

General Terms,” “Glossary of Personal Names,” and “Glossary of Place Names.”

Readers familiar with Donald L. Philippi’s 1968 translation may recall the formidable length of all of the transliterated names in that text. Philippi also provided a detailed glossary of all names that included potential etymologies. Each part of a name (morpheme) was glossed in Philippi’s work, in contrast to Heldt’s glossary, which breaks down each name into its meaningful parts in Japanese, but does not provide a meaning gloss to each one. Yoko Danno, on the other hand, offers a “retelling” of the “songs and stories” of the *Kojiki*; in fact, this 2014 work is a nearly complete translation. Danno adopts a flexible strategy on the handling of names. When the place name derives from a local legend, she gives both the Japanese name and the translation of it, as in “The shore was named Chi-ura, or Bloody Shore, because the blood from the dolphin’s snouts stank.” Similarly, when a personal name has implications for the story line, Danno transliterates the Japanese name but provides an English gloss in brackets, as, for example, in “she gave birth to a child, who was named Hoderi [radiant-fire].”[2] Otherwise, she opts for transliteration of the Japanese names.

Heldt cautions that the translation of names in the *Kojiki* “is an inherently speculative exercise” (p. xiii) owing to the ambiguity of the “complex orthography,” and the difficulty in identifying the sense of archaic words. In cases where no previous interpretations of a name’s signifying exist, Heldt has chosen to identify senses that alert readers to “significant aspects of early Japan’s material culture, religion, and natural environment” (p. xiv). As a case in point, Heldt renders the “spirit” name *Nuno-oshi-tomi-tori-naru-mi* as “Grand Wealth of Bird Cries Crossing Sea” (p. 39). This name is regarded as *meigi-mishō*, “name unidentified,” in two Japanese editions.[3] In the glossary, Heldt explains that “the element *nuno* in his name literally means ‘cloth,’ which was a source

of wealth in early Japan. It also links him to his maternal grandfather Master Overgrown Mountain, who represents slopes covered in the sort of vines used for making textiles” (p. 214). Heldt’s interpretation seems entirely plausible, especially since the characters writing the name appear to be used semantically, and not phonetically (布忍富鳥鳴海).[4] It is also a good example of his philosophy of translating names in order to provide the reader with some knowledge of Japan’s early society and environment.

Many of the rhetorical techniques Heldt adopts are quite effective. For example, Heldt uses strategies such as alliteration (e.g., “spraying spume,” p. 21), and repetition (e.g., repeating the phrase “bit them to bits” three times, pp. 20-21) to evoke some of the resonance and ritual properties of the original text. “Bit them to bits” refers to Amaterasu’s biting of Susano-o’s sword to bits in their child-bearing contest, and the translation mirrors the repetition of the Japanese original, as well (*sagami ni kamite*). His translation is also highly idiomatic, which enhances readability.

There are a few translation and stylistic decisions that do not seem to work as well in creating a seamless narrative. One such case is the apparent translation of all instances of honorific prefixes as “mighty,” as in the following account of the “Great Land Master” (Ōkuninushi): “Having completed all his preparations to depart, he placed a mighty hand on the saddle of his mighty steed and a mighty foot in its mighty stirrup, and then he sang a song” (p. 35). In the original Japanese text, all of these nouns described as “mighty” in the translation are preceded by the honorific prefix 御 in the original text, and glossed as *mi-* in the Japanese reading.[5] To be sure, the designation of “mighty” lends a weightiness to the narrative that is worthy of the awe-inspiring nature of spirits. When “mighty” appears repeatedly in close succession, however, this can be distracting to the reader and actually imparts an almost comic, cartoon-like affect to the scene. A better strategy

might have been selective rendition of honorifics in the translation.

Other decisions that one might question relate to the translation of particular words and phrases. Heldt translates all references to imperial burial sites as “barrow,” as in “His mighty barrow lies in Shrike” (p. 149) for *Mi-haka wa Mozu ni ari*. [6]. In contemporary use, “barrow” used in reference to a mound of earth or stones placed over a burial site, or to the grave mound or tumulus itself, appears largely as a technical term, or as a general-use term evoking the archaic. A word readily familiar to contemporary readers, such as “tomb,” might have been a better choice.

In a number of places, Heldt uses the linking expression “and so” at the beginning of a sentence, in a way that seems less than felicitous, as no causal connection or link to the previous sentence has been established. A case in point appears on p. 151: “At this time, the lord of the land of Silla presented eighty-one ships filled with tribute. And so the chief envoy who presented this tribute was a nobleman of the royal house of Silla by the name of Komu Mu, whose deep knowledge of medicinal lore cured heaven’s sovereign of his illness.”

Synonyms of “and so” include *thus*, *therefore*, *then*, none of which work well in this context. In the original text, this connective appears as 爾, and is read as *shikakushite*. [7] A translation that is more faithful to the original might convey the actual sense of causality, which lies in the latter part of this passage, more effectively, viz. “It happened that the chief envoy who presented this tribute was a nobleman of the royal house of Silla named Komu Mu. Possessed of a profound knowledge of medicine, this envoy cured heaven’s sovereign of his illness.”

The work consists of an introduction, the translation, the three glossaries, two useful maps that show Heldt’s translation of place names along their Japanese transliterated names, and a bibliography. The glossaries are quite instructive, and

may be consulted in lieu of an index, which is lacking. This rich and accessible translation will be welcomed by specialists and students alike, and will no doubt invite renewed interest in the *Kojiki* as literature in the English reading audience.

Notes

[1]. Basil Hall Chamberlain, trans., *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* (1882; Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1982), xxv-xxvi.

[2]. Yoko Danno, *Songs and Stories of the Kojiki*, second ed. (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2014), 106, 52.

[3]. Yoshinori Yamaguchi and Takamitsu Kōnishi, eds. *Kojiki, Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1997), 93n27; and Kenji Kurano and Yūkichi Takeda, eds. *Kojiki, Norito. Nihon koten bungaku taikai 1* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), 107n18.

[4]. Yamaguchi and Kōnishi, eds., *Kojiki*, 93.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 88-89.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 315.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 319.

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