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This is the first book-length study of Susanoo, a unique and complicated deity (or kami in Japanese) in Japanese mythologies. According to *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihon shoki* (The Chronicle of Japan), two major mythological-historical texts compiled by the state in the early eighth century, Susanoo was the younger brother of Amaterasu, the female progenitor of the imperial family of Japan. He played outrageous mischiefs against his sister and was exiled from heaven as punishment. The book traces the “role myths and legends surrounding Susanoo played in Japanese intellectual history from the ancient to the modern period” (p. 2). A distinctive feature of the myths and legends about Susanoo is his connection with the Korean peninsula. Another goal of the book is to explore how Susanoo’s connection with Korea was reinterpreted for legitimating Japan’s colonization of Korea in the twentieth century. The author argues that Susanoo occupies an ambiguous and liminal position in the mythologies in relation to Amaterasu, a position similar to that of Korea in relation to Japan, and it is this parallel position of ambiguity that lends Susanoo to ideological instrumentalization for justifying Japan’s colonization of Korea as well as for formulating the Japanese identity over time. This is the central argument of the book and it is an intriguing one to which I will return later.

Susanoo has long been the subject of study for scholars of religion, mythology, folklore studies, and anthropology within and outside Japan. The book under review differs from early studies in two significant ways. First, it engages with a wide range of primary and secondary sources in Japanese, English, and German. Most important, it looks into Korean primary sources to retrieve the perspective of the Koreans and show how they understood their historical connections with Japan. Second, this book is invigorated by a political sensitivity that is seldom seen among scholars of folklore and religions of premodern Japan. It investig-
ates how mythologies underwent transformations over the premodern period and how these transformations were mobilized by the modern Japanese state and society to justify imperialism. As a result, this book makes a novel contribution to the study of Japanese religions and history.

The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. The six chapters are grouped evenly into two parts, with part 1 titled “Blurred Boundaries and Liminal Identities” and part 2 “Political Mythology: A Genealogy of Susanoo’s Connection to Korea.” As revealed by the titles, the chapters do not follow a chronological order but are rather thematically arranged. This may not have been the best choice to arrange the narrative of the book as the reader needs to move back and forth between different chapters to follow the storyline.

In the introduction, the author identifies myth and identity as two key theoretical considerations. He introduces Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of the “invention of traditions” and the German Egyptologist Jan Assman’s concept of “cultural memory” as theoretical tools to interrogate the political function of mythologies and to make the point that myths were constantly transformed for new purposes but transformations were always shaped by constraints of earlier traditions. Yet how these well-recognized theoretical concepts can invigorate the analysis of Susanoo remains unclear to me. Furthermore, while it is easy to see how myth is related to identity formation for a society or culture, the book does not clearly explain the relationship between the myth’s dual roles, one for identity formation (defining who we are) and the other as political ideology (mythifying the pursuit of power). The book appears to conflate these two roles, suggesting that myth shapes identity and simultaneously justifies power relationships. This notion of myth seems to underlie the author’s basic methodology. Thus, when he examines the ideologies underpinning Japan’s colonization of Korea, he interprets them as types of identity formation.

The first chapter, “At the Margin of the Divine Country: Korea in Japanese Cultural Imagination,” examines the historical Japanese perceptions of Korea. According to the author, Japanese perceptions of Korea up to the modern period can be divided into three types: Korea as a land of riches and advanced civilization, Korea as a threat to Japanese security, and Korea as a disobedient Japanese vassal state. While this classification is useful, I wonder if it might overstate the historical context. Although the author refers to primary sources, including Nihon shoki and the famous Kwanggaeto Stele inscriptions discovered in 1880, none of these sources directly express admiration or speak about a security threat. They are the author’s own interpretations of the sources.

When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, a discourse of common ancestry, partly developed out of the above perceptions, became popular and was subsequently used to justify imperial Japan’s colonial policy of assimilation of Korea as reunion with the Japanese family state. The second part of the chapter discusses in detail the rise and circulation of the theory of common ancestry that went in tandem with Korea’s colonization and marginalization in the emerging empire of Japan. The final section of the chapter brings in Susanoo and discusses how Susanoo, as the embodiment of the common ancestry theory, became entangled with the politics of deity enshrinement in colonial Korea. The author makes the point that Susanoo’s marginalized position vis-à-vis Amaterasu mirrors and parallels Korea’s subjugated position in relation to Japan. Moreover, the common ancestry theory argues for Susanoo being none other than Tan’gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation. Therefore, enshrining Susanoo in colonial Korea was a polarizing issue for Japanese colonizers because it could signify both the exaltment of Japanese imperial ancestors and the valuation of Korean ethnicity.
Chapter 2, “A Foil to Set Off the Sun Goddess: Susanoo in the Ancient Sources,” provides an informative overview of Susanoo as introduced in Japanese canonical sources, primarily *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, the eighth-century local gazetteer of Izumo Province. The chapter highlights the complexity and heterogeneity of the myths surrounding Susanoo. Susanoo is portrayed as a deity with strong emotions, prone to violent and destructive acts, who also performs benevolent and pacifying deeds after being expelled from heaven to the earthly land of Izumo. Despite the complex character of Susanoo, the author concludes that the deity in the mythologies serves as a foil to set off the sun goddess Amaterasu: “While Amaterasu symbolizes central authority, Susanoo is associated with the periphery” (p. 64). Indeed, later interpretations constructed a dichotomy between Amaterasu and Susanoo as between elder sister versus younger brother, sun versus moon/storm, light versus darkness, order versus insubordination, and, finally, good versus evil. This dichotomy prepared the discursive ground for the ideological uses of Susanoo in justifying Japan’s colonization of Korea in the modern period.

The third chapter, “Passion for Transgression: Susanoo’s Liminal Character,” identifies liminality as Susanoo’s key character and compares this liminality with colonized Korea’s marginalized position in the Japanese empire. Susanoo takes the form of the figure of trickster, who occupies an ambiguous in-between position, in the sense that Susanoo is neither a member of the celestial gods to which Amaterasu belongs nor the earthly gods whom Susanoo helped. The trickster Susanoo breaks taboos and rules, but his taboo breaking ends up defining the divine order represented by his sister, the sun goddess Amaterasu. Susanoo in liminality provided a model for defining Koreans’ relation to the Japanese metropole as the deity could be used to reconcile the contradictory attitudes of Japanese thinkers and politicians toward their peninsular compatriots, insofar as the Koreans were of the same ancestral origin as the Japanese, but at the same time placed in perpetual marginalization and subjugation.

Chapter 4, “I Do Not Want to Stay in This Land: Susanoo’s Sojourn to Korea in the Ancient Court Chronicles,” looks into how early canonical sources and exegetical interpretations up to the ninth century linked Susanoo to the Korean peninsula as well as to the peripheral realms of death. This chapter is the best part of the book. The main canonical sources consulted include *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *Sendai kuji hongi*, an influential text from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries. The last two texts mention Susanoo going to Korea with his son and then returning to the archipelago. Here, two toponyms, “Soshimori” and “Kumanari,” mentioned in the two texts functioned as the key link tying Susanoo to the Korean peninsula. This chapter conducts a detailed, highly informative investigation of the origin and the changed meanings of the two terms. The author suggests the term “Kumanari” may have originated in Manchuria or Korea and was brought to Japan before the eighth century when the canonical texts were compiled. Kumanari does seem to refer to an actual site on the Korean peninsula, and the term contains a cluster of meanings: bear, river, and mountain, which were the basic elements of many founding myths in the Korean peninsula. Japanese intellectuals in the twentieth century used these semantic connections to popularize the theory of common ancestry and legitimate Korea’s colonization.

Chapter 5, “The God with a Thousand Faces: Susanoo and His Alter Egos in Medieval Mythology,” is another highlight of the book. It examines how, under the influence of Buddhism, Susanoo became tied to the negative notions of disease and death in the medieval period, roughly from the late twelfth to the late sixteenth century. The author does so by exploring how Susanoo became enshrined at one of the most famous shrines in Kyoto, the Yasaka Shrine, and became associated
with Kyoto’s most well-known festival: the Gion Matsuri. The shrine was originally a Buddhist institution, unrelated to Susanoo, and in the ninth century the court started to mobilize the Buddhist divine power to pacify vengeful spirits and stop epidemics by performing rituals at the shrine, which evolved into today’s Gion Matsuri festival. This chapter sifts through a trove of sources to retrace the transformations of medieval mythologies that ended up tying Susanoo to Gion as a pestilence deity. It was also in the same period that Susanoo came to be identified with Shinra Myojin, a pestilence deity of Korean origin, thus taking on a foreign identity, on the one hand, and becoming associated with the realm of death or hell, on the other.

Chapter 6, “Korea as a Realm of Death: Susanoo and Korea in Modern Discourse,” explores how medieval interpretations of Susanoo were challenged in the early modern period (1600-1867) and how, in the Meiji period (1868-1912), Susanoo became the key link in the discourse of common ancestry of Japan and Korea. At the same time, his association with the realm of death functioned to form a contrast between a shining and progressive Japan and a sinister and dark Korea, justifying Japan’s colonization of the peninsula. Buddhist associations of Susanoo came under the attack of early modern intellectuals, but out of respect for Nihon shoki, they trusted the mythological narratives and held that Susanoo was indeed of Korean origin. Anti-Buddhist scholars distinguished Susanoo from Shinra Myojin and other “foreign” names at the Gion Shrine. After the Meiji Restoration, priests of the Gion Shrine proceeded to reconfigure Susanoo’s multiple identity associations. For the sake of survival, they had to retain the deity’s identification with a Korean pestilence, but in turn they were able to renounce his association with Buddhism. By the mid-Meiji period, two decades before the annexation of Korea in 1910, a scholarly discourse of Susanoo had emerged identifying him as the Korean founding deity Tan’gun, precursor to the common ancestry theory, and also advanced the notion of Korea as a realm of death.

The epilogue gives a brief survey of the discursive transformations of Susanoo in postwar scholarship, tourism, and popular culture, such as video games. A notable aspect of Susanoo’s postwar transformation is the horse-rider theory proposed by the Japanese historian Egami Namio, which overturned the prewar common ancestry theory by arguing that the Japanese originated in the Korean peninsula. Motivated by Japanese scholars’ desire to overcome prewar imperialist legacies, the theory nevertheless lacked strong evidence and is now largely forgotten. However, the theory cannot be dismissed outright either, as it did alert people to the extremely inconvenient possibility that the imperial household of Japan may have originated in Korea.

The book shines when it examines sources to trace the changes of mythological narratives over time. Chapters 4 and 5 do a particularly good job in this regard. The changes of the status of Susanoo as a mythological figure in the classical and medieval periods are very well illustrated. By pointing to the connections between premodern and modern interpretations about Susanoo, this book offers a deep historical angle for understanding modern Japanese imperialism. The book, however, suffers from a lack of a smooth storyline threading together the chapters. This is probably due to the fact that the central point the book tries to make about the parallel binary of Susanoo versus Amaterasu and Korea versus Japan is not a strong one. Even if we assume that this parallel binary did exist, the role of mythology and Susanoo in justifying modern Japan’s colonization of Korea is arguably not as significant as the author seems to suggest. In other words, the power of this discursive mechanism may not have been very strong historically.

That being said, this book is the first book-length study of Susanoo. It is well-researched and
brings a vital political sensitivity to studies of Japanese religion and history. I would recommend this book to all students of Japanese religion and history as well as anybody interested in Japan and East Asia.

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