

A Study of Temple Histories

OSAMU KATATA

A typical temple history (*jin-engi*) is usually comprised of descriptions of the founding and historical evolution of the temple, as well as miraculous stories connected with the Buddha and Bodhisattva statues on its premises. Of the latter, the miraculous stories (*setsuwa*) are often tales so mystical and miraculous in content that they could never be recognized as having any possible historical basis. Such miraculous stories, however, while unfounded historically, should nonetheless be deeply considered from the historical circumstances surrounding their creation. An example of this is the frequent cases told of a Kannon statue made from a piece of driftwood floating on a mountain stream. The piece of wood, resplendent with light, was said to bring hardship to everyone wherever it went, until at last it was carved into a Kannon Bodhisattva statue, and installed in a temple hall, in time growing in legend among people from all walks of life as a wonder-working statue. Whereas it would be presumed that a holy, wonder-working statue such as this would be connected to a more noble legend, why is it such a vulgar story is told as to its origin—its transformation into a holy object being made only after a long journey? What was the motive which gave birth to such a strange story which was to be retold generation after generation? In this paper I will attempt a closer examination of mystical temple histories with the view in mind of clarifying the faith and

thought of the ancient Japanese.

As we follow the evolution of miraculous stories in temple histories, we find that such stories were already temple histories utilized in sources as early as the *Chronicle of Japan (Nihon Shoki)*. In the second year of Reiki (716) it was decreed by Imperial ordinance that temple histories were to be submitted annually for examination. This practice was enforced up until the early Heian period after which, suspended for a brief time, it was resumed with slight alterations. Temple histories from this period on were submitted once every four years. Further, the collection of such materials was simplified to an inventory-like short form, which concentrated on the origin of each temple. (This was the source materials used by contemporary literati such as Fujiwara no Akihira.) Thus it is generally regarded that ancient temple histories document historical fact, while miraculous stories are the direct result of later, simplified temple histories. This view, however, cannot go unquestioned for miraculous stories had already made their appearance in the temple histories quoted in the *Chronicle of Japan*. In the section belonging to the fourteenth year of Kimmei (545) it is related that the Buddha statue of Yoshino temple had originally been a glittering camphor-tree log floating offshore Chino-tomari in Izumi province before it was picked up and later on carved into a Buddha statue. Such miraculous stories appear in such frequency in ancient temple histories that they can even be said to be an essential characteristic of them. Rather than merely reject them altogether as historically false, we should try to seek the motive for the creation of such stories.

The temple history of Hase-dera, a temple in Yamato province, is taken up as an example, and its mystical elements analyzed and discussed. I give especially close consideration to the following elements: (1) that the Buddha statue is made from a glittering piece of wood which came floating down a mountain stream; (2) that the piece of wood continued to flow downstream, incurring disaster and casting evil spells wherever it went; (3) that at length it is made into a Buddha statue; and (4) that it finally comes to be placed on a firm rock. I also touch upon those elements seen in temple histories other than that of Hase-dera's, such as the manner of selection of the temple site (often made at the suggestion of an old man or hunter), and the appearance of auspicious animals (dog, horse, deer, wild boar, etc.) related to the construction of the temple.

In conclusion, at the source of the formation of these stories, involved is the notion of spirits characteristic of and indigenous to our own country. Generally stated, as far as the *Record of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)* and *Chronicle of Japan* are concerned, spirits were considered by the ancient Japanese to be glittering divine spirits which floated on the sea, thus reaching coastal regions, or which came floating down mountain streams, or which emerged from the earth, or descended from heaven. With such a notion of divine spirits prevalent, it is clear that the creation and institution of Buddha statues were treated in the same vein as that of the appearance of divine spirits. Temple histories were accepted by devotees as mythology, and such histories in fact served the function of myths. At the same time, although they were not historical fact, they

were accepted in the same way as if they were history. It is my conclusion that in this fact we should fathom the depths of the ancient Japanese faith and thought.