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February 3, 1992

Introduction to the Goddess in China and Japan

Welcome to a discussion of the Great Goddess in China and Japan; a difficult subject to approach at best. It is often assumed that the Great Goddess of the Neolithic, as known from Europe, is not to be found in East Asia. Discerning the mythological elements in the earliest Chinese texts is very difficult; the Chinese talent for abstraction and brilliant, but secular oriented, philosophy dominates the earliest examples from their written records. From the first millenium B.C. onwards, the ethics and morality of the family, clan, village and the society at large became the dominant metaphor for expressing the highest of spiritual ideals and conducting the deepest of philosophical journeys. Confucius did not write and teach in a vacuum. Only Taoism proceeded from different premises and it is there that our search begins for the mythological underpinnings of early Chinese religion (Giradot 1983). The female bodhisatvas of Buddhism are not manifestations of the Great Goddess as the philosophy of the Buddha made clear from the outset.

Japan did not begin to emerge from a country dominated by village organized agricultural peoples, until the seventh century A.D. and therefore clan-shamanic deities were at the core of all ritual life. Furthermore, Shinto, Tao and Zen were not intent on virtually obliterating the gods as Confucianism did in China; that change was forced by a medieval, patriarchal feudalism. Nonetheless, what the various Japanese goddesses might actually represent is a question that is only just beginning to be considered. As Giradot (1983) represents a break-through study for perceiving early Chinese mythology, Nakamura (1989) is one of the few publications in English that recognizes the Goddess in Japan and is concerned with more than cataloguing the detail of local deities or discussing the survival of female shamans.

This study is quite incomplete, a beginning only, to the recognition of the White Goddess in East Asia. Notice how recent many of the references are that accompany the text and how tentative the interpretations. Nonetheless, her existence is beyond doubt. Unlike in Europe, the complete chronicle of her presence, relationships on earth and eventual demise has yet to be written. Brilliant members of the Christian clergy in Europe recognized the goddess as a pagan enemy of major proportions and made the chronicle of her mortal wounding a major priority. In East Asia, there was no such militancy in the confrontation and the story was not deemed worthy of official recording in such a deliberate manner. Nonetheless, the history may be reconstructed from a variety of evidence and the work has begun.

References

Giradot, N.J. 1983. Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism. Berkeley, Ca: Univ. California Press.

Nakamura, K.M. 1989. "The Significance of Amaterasu in Japanese Religious History." in C. Olsen ed. The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present. Lexington, Mass.: Crossroad, pp. 176-189.

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