

*Reflecting the Past: Place, Language, and Principle in Japan's Medieval Mirror Genre.* By ERIN L. BRIGHTWELL. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 320 pp. ISBN: 9780674247819 (cloth).

Although Japan's *Mirror* texts do not initially appear to cohere as a genre, Erin L. Brightwell's fine monograph *Reflecting the Past: Place, Language, and Principle in Japan's Medieval Mirror Genre* elucidates the ties that bind them. In so doing she both frees them from the shackles of twentieth-century notions of genre and provides a much-needed reorientation of the place of the *Mirrors* within the canon.

The book's major contribution is to demonstrate that the *Mirrors* were guided by cosmological principles (*dōri*) that "made change sensible," a new approach to historiography Brightwell calls "cosmological history" (p. 3). The introduction delineates a four-part analytical model—place, principle, language, and the relationship between ordering the past and narrative structure (p. 4)—to identify how the *Mirrors* establish authority and veracity. These categories are what allow the author to treat them as a coherent genre in spite of their differences.

When Brightwell humbly asserts that "there is no smoking gun in this study" (p. 32), she undervalues what is in fact a crucial observation: by providing continuity with the past that promised a knowable future, these so-called cosmological histories became essential tools for ordering the world, particularly during times of crisis. In short, time and its ordering are the primary concerns of the *Mirror* texts, an especially important observation given that at the point of their authoring Japanese believed they were in the last of three periods—that of the latter ages of the Buddhist law, or *mappō*—according to the Buddhist framework of time. However, this framework proved insufficient to explain the unrest of the late twelfth-century and occasioned the "question of how things had reached their present state, as well as, on occasion, what the future might hold" (p. 2). The author cogently argues that the *Mirrors* provided answers in the form of a

linear, causal, and, most importantly, cosmological, model for interpreting disorder. It would seem almost axiomatic to say that “*Mirrors* nearly always appear in times when the existing structures and institutions of power have recently been exposed as vulnerable” (p. 29). But that is the effect of good insights: they seem axiomatic, and at times inevitable.

There are eight *Mirrors*, the first of which, *Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror), was written around the turn of the twelfth century. Composed in classical Chinese and in the annals format of an official history, it was in fact an attempt to bridge the gap between court-commissioned histories and narrative fiction. That it focused on “the causality that governed events” (p. 9) became the prevailing trait of the next three *Mirrors*, *Imakagami* (The New Mirror), *Mizukagami* (The Water Mirror), and *Kara kagami* (The China Mirror), which sought to explain the civil unrest that accompanied the Genpei Wars, the Jōkyū Disturbance, and the Mongol Invasions respectively. The last four—*Azuma kagami* (The Mirror of the East), *Masukagami* (The Clear Mirror), *Shinmeikyō* (The Mirror of the Gods), and *Nomori no kagami* (The Mirror of the Watchman in the Fields)—were written during the decline of central authority that marked the next century.

The book chapters explore the *Mirrors* in chronological order to chart the genre’s development from texts of causal interrogation (chapters 1-3) to those that, in the wake of the Mongol Invasions, could no longer make sense of the world using causality (chapter 4), and finally into a reflection of a nostalgic yearning for the past in a disordered world no cosmological principle could possibly explain (chapter 5). The conclusion tracks the book’s theoretical refraction forward into the Tokugawa period where the *Mirrors* became “a type of teaching text...that could teach nearly anything in the early modern world” (p. 284). I also appreciated Brightwell’s treatment of ancillary texts such as *Gukanshō* (My Humble Thoughts), *Jinnō shōtōki* (A Chronicle of Gods and Sovereigns), and *Baishōron* (A Discourse on Plums and Pines), which she argues defied traditional

taxonomies because by and large they were “historiographical experiments that did not garner a substantial contemporary readership” (p. 272).

*Reflecting the Past* draws on a remarkable corpus of both Japanese and Western scholarship to situate itself admirably within recent debates about the importance of place, time, and genre in premodern Japan. In this respect Brightwell’s research is especially indebted to the scholarship of David Bialock, Elizabeth Oyler, and David Spafford. The book’s structure is particularly effective, each chapter commencing with a list of the main texts to be addressed and providing salient information like authorship, date, and chronology, and concluding with a summary that contextualizes the argument within the author’s theoretical framework. Overall, Brightwell’s depth of scholarship and clarity of vision were impressive.

My one criticism is of Brightwell’s treatment of binaries. While I appreciate the postmodern tendency to complicate structuralist theories, binary structures are by no means a legacy of only the twentieth century. Notions such as *ōbō-buppō sōiron* (the interdependence of royal and Buddhist Law) were integral components of premodern ideology and rhetoric; nor should we forget that the *Mirrors* were written during the Kamakura and Northern and Southern Courts periods, both of which conceived of the major struggles of the times—the Genpei Wars and the Wars of the Northern and Southern Courts—as dualistic. Given that the *Mirrors* are profoundly influenced by these upheavals and yet “rarely address or even acknowledge [them]” (p. 29), the significance of such binaries in the creation of a cosmologically cohesive explanation of events might just as easily go unacknowledged. Thus, while we need not be ensnared by a binary view of the past, we may still recognize the very real hold they had on the creation of narratives.

*Reflecting the Past* is an articulate, well-researched, and theoretically sophisticated analysis that connects the *Mirror* texts into a cogent genre whose gaze reflects a desire for the certitude of

overarching cosmological principles in uncertain times. It is a testament to the quality of Brightwell's book that for this reader it opened as many or more intellectual doors as it closed, a trait that only the most rigorous and stimulating arguments can claim.

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