
Research Notes

**Snake and fox in medieval literature:
Depiction of otherness issue in literary trope of human-animal unions**

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【Abstract】

The literary genre of *sekkyō* marks a crucial moment in the history of traditional Japanese performing arts. It is both the “father” of traditional Japanese *ningyō-jōruri* puppet theater and the “mother” of kabuki theater. The “Five *sekkyō*” is a collection of representative librettos popular from the late medieval to early modern periods, among which “She Fox (*Shinoda-duma*)”, that features a vixen, has not yet been translated in its 1674 version. Its analysis is essential to understanding how literary imaginations gradually shifted and shaped the breeding ground from which the emblematic arts of Japanese culture have drawn. Considering that interspecies weddings are at the heart of popular literature, this study will focus on two major traditions. The first features snake deities, while the second features metamorphosed foxes. This paper will show that the shift from the figure of the snake to that of the fox marks a turning point in the history of Japanese literature and thought and will attempt to shed light on what this evolution tells us about the perception of otherness in Muromachi Japan, just before the explosion of Edo culture.

Key words: performing arts, *sekkyō*, traditional puppet theater, she fox trope

研究ノート

中世文学における蛇と狐
－異類婚姻譚を文学的に描写する中での「他者認識」問題－

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【要 旨】

日本の伝統芸能である「説教」は、人形浄瑠璃や歌舞伎の源流として極めて重要な位置付けにある。特に「五説経」は中世から近世に広く流布した正本集であり、その中の一つ「信太妻」は1674年版の翻訳がまだない。大衆文学の異類婚姻譚の系譜を分析することは、日本文化の象徴的芸術がどのように育まれてきたかを解明する手掛かりとなるだろう。本研究ではその中心をなす2つの主要な伝統、すなわち蛇と狐の伝承の変遷に焦点を当てる。これらの変遷は室町時代の他者認識を反映したものと捉えられることにより、江戸時代に大きく開化する芸能文化の萌芽を示唆している。

キーワード：舞台芸術、説経、人形劇、狐女房

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[Received on August 29, 2023] [Accepted on February 6, 2024]

Introduction

In the 17th century, the compilation known as “Five sekkyō” (*Go sekkyō*, 1674) was codified, amalgamating five seminal works in the theatrical genre known as *sekkyō-bushi*. The term *sekkyō* refers to a mode of performative storytelling, replete with sung dialogues and public enactments. Emerging as a derivative of traditional medieval arts, these narrative compositions bearing Buddhist moral imperatives reached their apogee between the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) periods. They served not merely as vehicles for entertainment but also as efficacious mediums for the dissemination of Buddhist tenets and the veneration of specific temples and sacred effigies. While noh theater was largely sequestered within the domain of the warrior elite, *sekkyō* offered more populist avenues, initially accompanied by the strumming of the biwa and later adorned with puppetry and shamisen melodies, particularly after the 16th century when the shamisen superseded the biwa.

The establishment of the “Five sekkyō” anthology facilitated the consolidation of a textual canon, whose provenance has been traced back to the early Kamakura period by scholars such as Inumaru Osamu and Shinoda Jun’ichi (Mizukami, 1999, p. 301 & Shinoda, 1999, p. 566). Among the constituent tales is the “She Fox” (*Shinoda-duma*), a narrative that offers fecund ground for elucidating a specific epoch in Japanese folklore. This tale underwent various permutations, spawning kabuki adaptations, engi narratives (explanatory tales about the origins of temples), and fine arts. It is commonly posited that the *sekkyō* genre serves as the “progenitor” of traditional Japanese ningyō-jōruri puppet theater and the “matriarch” of kabuki theater (Mizukami, 1999, p. 301). However, it is imperative to underscore that the *sekkyō* form is not necessarily the origin of traditional performing arts texts. Our endeavor here

is not to ascertain an ‘original’ or ‘pure’ form of these narratives, particularly during a historical juncture when the concept of authorship was fluid and not firmly entrenched. To perceive this anthology as an archetypal or foundational corpus would be intellectually specious. Rather, it provides invaluable insights into a distinctive cultural moment, the nuances of which we aim to explicate and isolate.

What is *Shinoda-duma*?

The theatrical work known as “She Fox” (*Shinoda-duma*) is an intricate tapestry that weaves elements from the aureate legend of the historical persona Abe no Seimei (921-1005). Noted for his prowess in chiromancy and divination, Abe no Seimei’s extraordinary capabilities provoked speculative whispers, which were subsequently canonized in literary chronicles. Such suppositions led to the construction of the legend that posited him as the progeny of a valorous archer of distinguished lineage, a scion of the poet Fujiwara no Nakamaro and a vixen lady by the name of Kusunoha.

The foundational narrative of “She Fox” appears to have coalesced during the Muromachi epoch (1336-1573), synchronous with the burgeoning legend of Abe no Seimei. This period, especially the years 1392-1573, witnessed a surge in the popularity of *otogi-zōshi*, a genre of prose narratives. Within this literary milieu, fox characters gained pronounced prominence, as exemplified by “Kowata-gitsune”, one of the 23 focal tales within the expansive *otogi-zōshi* corpus that numbers approximately 350 texts. These narratives often explore wondrous unions between humans and transmuted animals, thereby creating a self-contained ontological sphere. Furthermore, the tale has been reinterpreted through a gamut of artistic forms. Notably, it exists in a variation entitled “Mirror of the Great Household of the Holy Magus Ashiya” (*Ashiya Dōman Ōuchikagami*),

penned by Takeda Izumo, first enacted in *ningyō-jōruri* puppet theater in 1734 and subsequently adapted for kabuki in 1735. Of additional interest is the 1913 opera libretto “The White Fox”, composed by Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913), initially performed in the Japanese language in 2013 under the title “White Fox” (*Byakko*) at Myoko City Cultural Hall to commemorate the centennial of Okakura’s passing.

As a result, “She Fox” (*Shinoda-duma*) enjoys its status as one of the quintessential masterworks within the *sekkyō-bushi* genre, along with “Sanshō the Bailiff” (*Sanshō-dayū*), “Karukaya”, “Shintokumarū” and “Oguri”.

Synopsis of the play

The narrative arc of this tale delineates the life and extraordinary accomplishments of Abe no Seimei, an eminent practitioner of divination and esoteric cosmology who served the imperial court during Japan’s Heian period (794-1185). Perhaps owing to his prodigious abilities in the occult sciences, a legend emerged proposing that he must be of non-human lineage, specifically, a fox. The renowned ethnographer and poet Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) even invoked the concept of totemism in contextualizing this claim (Orikuchi, 2016, pp. 41-44). The earliest extant reference to Abe no Seimei’s purported animal ancestry is found in the daily records of a 15th-century monk, penned in “Daily Notes of Cloud-Lying Days” (*Ga-un Nikken Roku*), compiled in 1562, but originally written between 1446 and 1448. Within this source, Seimei is described as an enigmatic “monster”, devoid of human parentage.

Further adding to the intricacy of this legend, a Taoist divination treatise known as “Hoki-naiden”, published in the late 17th century, asserts that the manuscript—which traces the aureate legend of this fabled magus—was penned by Abe no Seimei himself. Herein, he is characterized as the progeny

of an aristocrat from Osaka and a vixen dwelling in the Shinoda forest.

Regarding the *sekkyō* text “She Fox”, the earliest compilation dates back to 1674. In its third act, labeled “The Farewell of Kuzunoha to Her Son” (*Kuzunoha Ko-wakare no Dan*), the narrative unfolds as follows:

In the province of Izumi, in close proximity to the Shinoda forest, resided a family in a state of seclusion. On a particular autumnal day, the patriarch, Abe Yasuna, ventured forth to engage in agricultural endeavors. Concurrently, his spouse, Kuzunoha, tucked their seven-year-old progeny, Abe no Dōji, into bed and occupied herself with the task of weaving. However, as she paused to admire the chrysanthemums in full bloom within their garden, her true, non-human nature was inadvertently, yet irrevocably, unmasked.

Captivated by the resplendent hues and ethereal aroma of the chrysanthemums adorning her garden fence, Kuzunoha momentarily lapses into a state of reverie. In this unguarded interlude, she inadvertently relinquishes her assumed human visage, undergoing a transient metamorphosis. At this juncture, the somnolent child, Abe no Dōji, rouses from his slumber. Groping behind her, he ambles toward what he presumes to be his mother. Upon confronting her transformed countenance, however, he utters an anguished cry, exclaiming, “What a fright!”

In actuality, Kuzunoha represents an avatar of the vixen whose existence had once been preserved through the merciful intervention of her husband, Yasuna. When their son, Abe no Dōji, awakens and witnesses her in this liminal state—oscillating between human and fox—the implicit covenant that enabled her sojourn in

the human realm is irrevocably shattered. Recognizing that her tenure among humans can no longer be sustained, the vixen-turned-mother inscribes an elegiac poem on a *shōji*, the traditional sliding paper door.

“If you yearn for my presence,
seek me out in Izumi,
within the woods of Shinoda
—resentful Kuzunoha.” (“She Fox”,
Saruhachi-za libretto, original work circa
1674)



Figure 1. The character of Kuzunoha calligraphizes her farewell message (Saruhachi-za).

In the dimming light of evening, the father and son search the forest for Kuzunoha but do not find her. Overwhelmed by grief, they consider taking their own lives to hopefully reunite with her in another world. Just then, Kuzunoha appears one last time in her human form. She says her final goodbyes and leaves them gifts before vanishing into the forest. The gift for her son is a special box from the Dragon’s palace that grants him knowledge of the stars and human life. Her husband receives a magical ball that lets him understand the songs of birds and animals. According to the story, when the son grows up, he uses the gift to diagnose and cure the Emperor’s illness, eventually becoming the official diviner at court.

In a moment of deep sadness and confusion, Yasuna feels his energy draining away as he says, “So the time has come. If you are an animal, show yourself. Hiding like this shows you don’t care. It’s clear, we’ll wait forever. I will end our child’s life and then my own. This will break our ties to this world.” Turning to his child, he adds, “Your mother is gone, and your father chooses to die to find her again. Should we die together?” Tears in his eyes, the child says, “If it means joining her, go ahead and end my life.” Feeling more confused and weaker, Yasuna takes out his sword, ready to end it all. Just then, he sees her appearing behind him. The vixen appears, crying. Seeing her, the child shouts, “Terrible!” and hides behind his father. Yasuna says, “Little one, this is your mother. But you scare him in this form. Can you metamorphose to look human again?” The fox obliges, transforming beside a lake under a tree. The child, relieved, runs to hug her. She embraces him tightly and says, “What brought you here? Your presence reconnects me to this complicated world, and it’s sad.” Tears in his eyes, Yasuna pleads, “He misses you. Can you please come back to take care of him until he’s at least ten years old?” She replies, also crying, “I wish I could, but I can’t stay in the human world. I can’t come back to our home once I return to my natural habitat. But I have gifts for you before you go.” She hands her son a golden box and says, “This box from the Dragon Palace will give you the knowledge of stars and the world.” Then she shows her husband a crystal ball, saying, “With this, you’ll understand the language of birds and animals. It’s a powerful gift.” Yasuna responds, “I understand, but I still feel lost and confused. I hope you find peace where you are.” They all share a final moment before

going their separate ways. (“She Fox”, Saruhachi-za libretto, original work circa 1674)



Figure 2. Rehearsal scene, Yasuna is about to kill his son (Saruhachi-za)



Figure 3. Poster for the play “She Fox” performed by the Saruhachi-za troupe in November 2022¹).

In the Interstices of Folklore and Literary Tradition: The Motif of Interspecies Unions in Japanese Narratives

Situated at the confluence of several quintessential topoi within the broader Japanese literary milieu, the narrative of the “She Fox” serves as a fertile ground for interdisciplinary examination. This tale straddles the categories of “Gratitude Tales” (known in Japanese as either “*megumi*” or “*on*”) and

“Reciprocity Narratives” (*on-gaeshi*), in which an animal undergoes anthropomorphic transformation to benefit its human benefactor. In this particular account, Abe no Yasuna saves a fox being pursued by hunters, ultimately falling in love with the transformed creature and fathering a child with her.

Furthermore, the story nestles itself within the expansive category of “Tales of Interspecies Matrimony” (*irui kon'in tan*). These are narratives wherein a human being engages in matrimonial union with an animal, the species of which can range from foxes to snakes, monkeys, wild boars, bears, horses, otters, frogs, spiders, flies, and whelks, among others. The diverse array of possible animal partners serves to underscore the tale’s cultural elasticity and the breadth of its anthropological implications. The variability in the narratives is also contingent on the gender dynamics associated with the animal figure involved.

Noted Japanese folklorist Seki Keigo (1899–1990), a heterodox disciple of Yanagita Kunio—regarded as the progenitor of folklore studies in Japan—offers a structuralist interpretation of these interspecies narratives. According to Seki, the recurring pattern in these tales is often bifurcated into six main thematic elements:

- (1) Opportunistic Encounter: A human being either aids or rescues an animal in a moment of serendipitous interaction.
- (2) Transformation and Subsequent Engagement: The saved animal, in a metamorphic gesture, assumes human form and visits its savior as a mark of gratitude, thus initiating further developments in the narrative.
- (3) Thanks: the animal offers to live with its rescuer and assist in daily tasks, with the stipulation that a certain prohibition be respected, such as avoiding looking in private chambers.
- (4) Blessing: the animal’s presence leads to

blessings of material wealth or familial growth for its savior.

- (5) Epiphany: an epiphany occurs when the prohibition is violated, whether deliberately due to curiosity or accidentally, revealing the spouse's true identity and non-human nature.
- (6) Farewell: finally, the magical partner reverts to animal form and departs to the wild.

In contrast to the archetypal folkloric structure, this particular narrative lacks an explicit prohibition that is violated. Rather, it is the child born of the union between human and animal who inadvertently uncovers the true nature of the non-human parent. The subsequent farewell then leads to an intense reunion.

Unlike many folkloric traditions that frame such revelations as dread-invoking transgressions, this story conveys an empathy and pity that should extend to all suffering beings, regardless of form. The narrative underscores the strength of familial bonds spanning life and death, allowing reunification in an afterlife. Here, love supersedes any mystical pact, as the vixen overcomes her ordained departure to resume human form out of maternal concern. Familial love thus surpasses mythical order. Whether animal or outcast, love and faith suggest that any rifts unresolved in life may find reparation in death. Much like Lewis Carroll's Alice, the vixen Kuzunoha passes back through the looking glass via shapeshifting, reflecting in the waters. As scholar Orikuchi highlights, this tale centers primarily on a mother's love rather than the son's glory.

Despite the ubiquitous presence of fox statues at the entrance to many Shinto shrines dedicated to Inari, the fox was not always a salient figure in Japan's rice-growing folklore. The fox's enduring association with Inari and status as the deity's messenger was not firmly established until the 16th century.

In Japan's earliest classical texts, the fox is conspicuously absent or scarcely represented. No fox appears in the "Chronicle of Ancient Matters" (Kojiki, circa 711-712), and mentions are sparse in the "Japan Chronicle" (Nihonshoki, 720). Chapter XXVI of the Nihonshoki, chronicling Empress Saimei's Korean military campaign, lists two foxes (one white) among various calamitous omens, but without explicit ties to any deity. Such isolated fox sightings frequently feature amidst accounts of unexpected or anomalous animals, hinting at perceived causality. The absence of white foxes in particular aligns with their lack of endemic status in the contemporary Kansai-centered cultural realm. In "She Fox", the white fox is termed *yakan* rather than the modern *kitsune*, reflecting divergent lexical associations.

The other metamorphosis, the case of the snake

In the "Five sekkyō" tales, the fox is not the sole animal capable of metamorphosis and interacting with the human realm. The snake woman represents another significant case. Historically, in the provincial folklore compendiums "Fūdoki", serpents feature more prominently alongside deer, boars, wolves, and mythical *wani*. These narratives abound with fauna harnessing mysterious powers while mediating as deities, shapeshifting into human form.

Contrastingly, foxes appear absent from the oldest texts, while snake gods prove especially numerous. Their legends bear importance for agrarian rituals involving lightning and rain, yet also render them violent, threatening entities that transform to seduce and slay women. Folklore held that the mountain snake god taught blood rites in rice paddies to improve harvests (Sasaki, 2020, pp. 169-170). Once feared and venerated until the Nara period, this deity later fell from favor. During Heian times, particularly in the "Konjaku Monogatari-shū", serpents persist in tales, but largely as tricks of Kannon or repugnant,

pitiable beasts (Sasaki, 2020, pp. 187, 208, 213).

In the “Five sekkyō” tale “Oguri” (later adapted by Chikamatsu in 1698 and Takeda in 1738), a snake rather than fox transforms into a beautiful woman, marrying the protagonist. In the mid-17th century, these archaic serpent narratives still coexisted with more modern fox metamorphosis stories. Unlike the indebted fox spouse, this ophidian falls for the hero’s flute, shapeshifting out of romantic passion. No violated taboo precipitates their separation; only familial objections to the scandalous union. Clearly, the mythical snake woman’s sexuality threatens not her partner but societal order (Orikuchi, 2016, pp. 48-49). Orikuchi interprets such textual deviations as rejecting exogamy, with the animal symbolizing sociocultural otherness. Transformed snakes fleetingly consume then abandon human spouses, disturbing and dangerous outsider figures. Only divinely protected individuals like Oguri reportedly survive these unions unharmed.

“Oguri must take a wife”, they insisted. But he found fault with the first candidate, reproaching her for her towering height. He sent away another who resembled a tree from the deepest mountains. The second was too short, missing a cubit. The third had hair so long she looked snakelike. One suitor had a face as red as a demon, while another was so pale he derided her as a “snow woman”. Yet another with dark skin he scorned as inferior. In this manner, he dismissed them all. From his eighteenth birthday to the spring of his twenty-first year, no fewer than seventy-two prospective brides came calling, only to be rejected. One rainy day, as the downpour refused to let up, Oguri thought to himself: “I’m the son of Kurama, so I ought to go there to find a wife.”

Leaving his family’s Nijō residence on the

outskirts of Ichiharanobe, he took out his bamboo flute and moistened its eight holes. For half an hour he played *gagaku* tunes, a Chinese melody, a dance number, and a *shishi* song. When the mighty serpent of Lake Mizoro heard these tunes, it thought: “What interesting flute music! I’ll go thank the musician.” The hundred-and-sixty-cubit snake stretched to two hundred cubits in length. In awe, Oguri thought: “What a handsome fellow! I shall unite with him for a night.”

The serpent transformed into a gorgeous sixteen -or seventeen-year-old woman, while Oguri had the advantage of age. At the foot of a Kurama staircase, circumstance showed its face. Oguri figured this must be the answer to his prayers at Kurama. He loaded her onto a pearl-laden palanquin and headed for his family’s Nijō residence. He took care to prepare rare dishes from the mountains and sea, as well as sweets from every region. His joy was endless. But as the saying goes, “Bad news travels quick while good news stays put.” The town’s children spread word of Oguri’s nightly trysts with the great Mizoro serpent.

When Oguri’s father Kane’ie heard the rumor, he declared: “Though he’s my son, his behavior flouts propriety. Banish him to Iki and Tsushima.” But his wife replied: “If you cast him so far away, we’ll never see him again. Send him instead to my hometown in Hitachi, where we can be kept informed.” Kane’ie nodded in agreement. With the consent of Oguri’s maternal relatives, he was exiled to the Tojo Tamatsukuri in Hitachi. (“Oguri”, act two, Saruhachi-za libretto, Original work circa 16th century & Shinoda (1999))

This passage does not constitute a central episode in the play, but rather serves to establish Oguri’s

character and ground him in his cultural context. Interestingly, the protagonist has strong connections to Hitachi province. The “Fūdoki of Hitachi” (8th century) famously recounts the Yato-no-kami, a serpent deity inhabiting Namegata. This malevolent snake, evoking Medusa, brought misfortune to any who saw it. According to legend, any man meeting its gaze would perish, his lineage destroyed over two generations (Sasaki, 2020, p. 17).

Progressive advent of the fox figure

In contrast, the “Nihon Ryōiki” (compiled circa 787-822), Japan’s earliest Buddhist setsuwa collection formally titled “Nihonkoku Genpō Zen’aku Ryōiki” (and also called “Nihon Reiki”), incorporates stories of seductive foxes transforming into human form within its 116 tales.

Pre-Buddhist Hindu mythology in India already contained accounts of interspecies unions between humans and elephants or buffaloes. In China, legends of supernatural foxes (*yōkai*) proliferated extensively during the Later Han dynasty (25-220) and flourished further under the Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420). Thus, these fox tales arrived concurrently with Buddhism in Japan, firmly embedding themselves in local folklore by the 9th century. Through setsuwa like the “Nihon Ryōiki”, such narratives were well-established in popular culture by the Muromachi period.

Specifically, the “Nihon Ryōiki” twice recounts (II.8, II.12) the story of a woman named Okisome no Omi Tahime confronted by a snake about to kill and consume a frog. She promises unity if it spares the frog, and after agreeing, the snake returns to claim her. Seeking monk Gyōgi’s (668-749) counsel, he advises the Buddhist faith. Thereafter, she purchases and liberates a crab that dismembers the snake when it comes for her. Here, the masculine snake makes selfish demands, while the woman leverages faith to defeat it (Burton, 2013, pp.79-80

& 84-86).

The folkloric imagery surrounding foxes differs from other shapeshifters. In fox-woman tales, metamorphosis enables the animal, an outsider to the human realm, to gain acceptance rather than deceive victims. The transformation functions more as protection than allure. For instance, the second narrative in the inaugural “Ryōiki” volume recounts that during Emperor Kinmei’s reign (6th century), a single man in Mino Province (present-day Gifu Prefecture) sought marriage. While walking, he encountered and wed a beautiful woman who later bore a son. Concurrently, his female dog birthed puppies which endlessly barked in rage at the wife until the dog bit her leg. In shock and pain, the wife reverted to fox form and fled to the roof. Despite the man’s pleas, she vanished, leaving their child who was named Kitsune and became the ancestor of the Kitsune-no-atai family in Mino province (Burton, 2013, pp.14-15). This aligns closely with the “She Fox” plot, portraying the fox as a benevolent interfering figure, indexed as feminine.

Fox love section

The notion of foxes transforming into alluring women to seduce men likely originated in Tang China. The inaugural novelistic text, “Taiping Guangji” (977-978), contains 83 fox-centered tales, 69 borrowed directly from Tang literature. Tamamo-no-Mae exemplifies this folkloric motif. By the late Heian period (794-1185), legend held that Emperor Toba’s favored consort was in fact a vixen. After ravaging numerous Asian kingdoms, she allegedly metamorphosed into a woman to seduce and destroy Japan’s emperor. However, court diviner Abe no Yasunari saw through her disguise, forcing Tamamo-no-Mae to flee to Nasu Plain, where two warriors killed her. Notably, the many-tailed fox in human form was unmasked by a descendant of legendary mystic Abe no Seimei, subduing the sinister vixen.

As shown in the appendix, the pattern of animal metamorphosis enabling human unions recurs in East Asia. In Japan, mythical snakes have gradually ceded imaginative ground to foxes. The latter first benefited from the advent of Buddhist culture, then around the 10th century as tales lost religious dimensions and acquired amorous overtones, launching the literary trope of fox romance (Arakawa, 2015, p. 232). Of 60,000 stories in the 29-volume “Anthology of Japanese Folktales”, Kawamori Hiroshi’s comparative analysis of Japanese and Korean folktales identifies 1,170 accounts of interspecies unions, including 211 lady fox, 167 crane, and 159 snake tales featuring metamorphosis and eventual reversion (Kawamura, 1993, p. 401 & Appendix).

The 11th-century text “Brief History of Fusang” (*Fusōryakuki*) first links a female fox deity named Tōme to Inari worship, marking the genesis of their pairing. Thereafter, foxes began to be venerated as deities in Japan during the 11th and the 12th centuries, although the fox was not firmly associated with Inari until the 14th century. Inari was the protective agriculture and harvest deity, supplanting the previously ominous snake god long revered by peasants as the thunder, lightning, and rain bringer vital for crops. With the flourishing of Edo period culture, the exuberance of *yōkai* imagery finally transformed the fox into an enduring figure within Japanese literature and art.

Conclusion

This analysis aims to reflect on the seminal role of the “Five *sekkyō*” collection by comparing the serpentine woman motif in *Oguri* to the pioneering “She Fox” narrative. The latter marks a frontier in literary imagination, intertwined with the ascendancy of Abe no Seimei lore over snake myths. While intransigent prohibitions underpin mythology, this

play delighted commoners by suggesting love can partially tame nature and otherness. Unlike Korean tales where fox-human offspring lack special abilities, Japanese stories like “She Fox” portray benevolent metamorphosis. Though the non-human and strange may frighten children, enlightened souls discover happiness and gifts. As morality plays promoting temples through puppetry, *sekkyō* tales feature faith overcoming taboos. The fox epitomizes openness to outsiders and the promise of a sweeter life for the devout.

This analysis explores how the ancient literary trope of human-animal unions, when merged with Buddhist ideals, yields a more reasoned depiction of engaging with otherness. Rather than solely posing a terrifying threat, the non-human or outcast viewed with compassion represents a hopeful future. This study offers the first translation of the seminal yet previously untranslated *Shinoda-duma* text from the oldest known “Five *sekkyō*” version. Tracing the imaginative shift from snake to fox wives illustrates the syncretic intermingling and evolving mindsets of pre-Edo Japan.

Footnote

- 1) The 1674 *sekkyō* “She Fox” was first performed in 1984 by the Saruhachi-za traditional Japanese puppet company. It was also performed in London and Edinburgh (1998), in Poznan (2004), in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (2011), Lyon Paris for the Festival de l’Imaginaire (2014), in Ukraine in Lviv Kyiv and Dnipro (2017) and for the 34th Niigata National Cultural Festival (2019).

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Table 1 Typology of Japanese Tales. Adapted from Kawamura p. 401, *sekkyō* pieces highlighted, with category added

	Marriage types	Metamorphosis types	Husband undergoes a metamorphosis		Wife undergoes a metamorphosis	
			Title or category	Number of tales	Title or category	Number of tales
With wedding	Simple wedding	human → animal	Snake husband	5		
	Métamorphosis	human ← animal	Snail husband Frog husband	89 8	Cat wife	1
	Metamorphosis, union & reunion	animal → human → animal				
	Metamorphosis, union & separation	human ← animal				
	Union and separation	human ← animal			Dragon wife	27
Without wedding	With descendants	human ← animal	Snake husband	13		
	With descendants	animal → human → animal				
	With abortion	human ← animal	Snake husband	277		
	With premeditated death	human ← animal	Monkey husband Snake husband	672 401		
	Separation following an epiphany, taboo broken	human → animal → human			Snake wife Crane wife Fox wife “She Fox“	159 167 211 1
	Failed metamorphosis, then separation	animal → human → animal				
	Metamorphosis, union then séparation	human ← animal				
	Metamorphosis, union then separation	animal → human → animal			“Oguri” Snake wife	1
	Marriage and elopement	human → animal → human	<i>Oni</i> demon	28		
	With sacrifice	human ← animal				

Table 2 Typology of Korean Tales, Adapted from Kawamura p. 401

	Marriage types	Metamorphosis types	Husband undergoes a metamorphosis		Wife undergoes a metamorphosis	
			Title or category	Number of tales	Title or category	Number of tales
With wedding	Simple wedding	human → animal				
	Metamorphosis	human ← animal	Frog husband	6	Snail wife Scolopendridae wife	9 21
	Metamorphosis, union and reunion	animal → human → animal	Blue general husband	49		
	Metamorphosis, union and separation	human ← animal			Snail wife	12
	Union and separation	human ← animal				
Without wedding	With descendants	human ← animal	One-night husband	16		
	With descendants	human → animal → human			Fox wife	19
	With abortion	human ← animal	One-night husband	1		
	With premeditated death	human ← animal				
	Separation following an epiphany, taboo broken	animal → human → animal			Dragon wife	8
	Failed metamorphosis, then separation	animal → human → animal			Scolopendridae wife	47
	Metamorphosis, union then separation	human ← animal			Snail wife	11
	Marriage and elopement	human → animal → human			Bear wife	11
	With sacrifice	human ← animal			Tiger wife	11