

Part I – Imagining a Usable Past

Tradition (from the Latin *traditio*) literally means something handed down, a legacy from prior generations bestowed on the present. Yet the history of any tradition is as much about the needs of the present as it is about the authority of the past. When we seek answers in the precedents and mandates of antiquity, we often do so in order to address problems our ancestors and founding fathers could not have foreseen. In this respect, each generation could be said to imagine the past even as they look to it for guidance, raising some elements of tradition to prominence and allowing others to fall into obscurity. As Brian Cumings insightfully notes in his discussion of North Korean politics, “We all, consciously or not, live within and search for a usable past.” The historian’s perspective permits us to explore the transformations undergone by traditions even as they are called upon as touchstones of stability in a changing world.

If our engagement with tradition can be viewed as an act of imagination, it is one where conflicting interpretations are possible, even likely. Two articles by Brian Victoria, for example, discuss the ways in which Buddhist (and, to a lesser extent, Shinto) doctrines have been applied to the traumatic experience of war, social inequality and disaster in Japan, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. He notes that, while some have used the Buddhist imagery of karmic cause-and-effect to justify human suffering (and the social and political policies that so often create it), others have emphasized the Buddhist virtue of compassion to call for change in those very policies. In a similar fashion, Yoneyama Shoko describes the ways in which Ogata Masato and others have drawn on folk religious ideas to offer a damning critique of the dehumanizing commercialism of government responses to the ecological catastrophes at Minamata (where the devastating consequences of mercury poisoning were first identified in 1956) and Fukushima (where the 2011 failure of a nuclear plant continues to pose a threat to the health and safety of the region).

Perhaps the most obvious examples of the appropriation and contestation of traditional authorities can be found in the history of propaganda. As Byron Earhart notes, for example, the striking geography and religious history of Mount Fuji made it a prime symbol for the political imagination of Japan as a modern nation-state in the late nineteenth century. Especially during the Second World War, both the Japanese and the Allies used images of Fuji as an evocative synecdoche for the Japanese homeland, encouraging Japanese soldiers either to rise in defense of the motherland (and the expansion of her sphere of political influence) or to abandon their imperial ambitions in the Pacific and return to hearth and home. In a similar fashion, Saeyoung Park describes the symbolic appropriation (and ultimate transformation) of the Hyōnch’ungsa, a Confucian shrine honoring the sixteenth-century admiral Yi Sunsin, whose defeat of Japanese invaders was employed as a symbol for South Korean national identity after the expulsion of the Japanese occupation in World War II.

In the West — especially in the U.S., where “a wall of separation between Church and State” has been a foundational element of the national political tradition since Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists — it is easy to dismiss such political evocations of religious symbols and institutions as inauthentic or even illegitimate. Yet it is important to remember the long (and continuing) history of mutual influence between religious traditions and the political imagination. The appropriation and contestation of

traditional authorities has been (and continues to be) one of the central dynamics in social life, and appears to resist efforts to contain it within one or another narrow sphere of human experience.