Representations of ambivalent feelings towards China in the popular culture of early modern Japan

Prof Kobayashi Fumiko (Hosei University)
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Since ancient times, Japanese culture has been influenced by the reception of Chinese civilization. The respect shown to China, however, soon caused ethno-centric discourses in Japan as a form of reaction against this foreign influence. The tension between the influence of Chinese civilization and ethnocentric reactions against it constituted the framework for thought and religion in medieval Japan.

In the Edo period this framework still existed primarily as a confrontation between Confucianism and National Learning. At the time, when every field of culture was popularized, people enthusiastically supported kabuki and puppet dramas that had a nationalistic flavour.

How did Edo-period intellectuals see this issue? This paper examines the question by analysing works that belong to the genre known as kibyōshi, i.e., illustrated popular literature whose layout was developed out of children’s illustrated books and resembles that of today’s manga. Kibyōshi were written by literati, constituted a form of entertainment aimed at an adult readership and contained jokes about social and political issues as well as knowledge about the classics of China and Japan. I shall analyse two works which demonstrate an ambiguous attitude towards China and Japan through the use of ribald but intellectual humour. We will discover in these works a flexible point of view that enabled the author and the reader to laugh at the discourse of Japanese ethnocentrism.

KOBAYASHI Fumiko 小林ふみ子 is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Letters at Hōsei University (Tokyo), specializing in the literature and the arts of 18th and 19th-century Japan. She finished her doctoral work at the University of Tokyo in 2002 with a dissertation on Japanese 18th-century comic verse for which she was awarded the Prize of the Japan Society of Classical Literature (Nihon kotenbun gakkai shō) in 2003. Her dissertation was published in 2009 with the title Tenmei kyōka kenkyū 天明狂歌研究 (A Study of Comic Verse in the Tenmei Era). In 2002 she was at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) as a research fellow.

For further information contact:
Dr Laura Moretti
Lecturer in Pre-Modern Japanese Studies
Faculty of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies
Sidgwick Avenue Cambridge
CB3 9DA (UK)
Email: lm571@cam.ac.uk