

The Flower Contest between Two Divine Rivals

A Study in Central and East Asian Mythology

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Abstract. – In Central and East Asian mythology, two antagonistic divine beings (e.g., Maitreya and Śākyamuni) are often involved in dispute, vying with each other for sovereignty over the world, an island, a piece of land, or over the human destiny. They decide to settle the dispute by a flower contest; the one who would be the first to see a flower bloom in midnight should be the sovereign. This myth of the flower contest is found extensively in the Ryukyus, Korea, and Central Asia. After identifying the various thematic contexts into which it has been integrated, I would suggest that the myth probably originated somewhere in Central Asia, possibly among the Buriats, under the strong influence of syncretistic Iranian traditions. [*Central Asia, Korea, the Ryukyus, mythology, Maitreya and Śākyamuni, religious dualism, folklore*]

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Introduction

In 1971 the Japanese folklorist Miyata made public a myth of the flower contest found in Miyako (the main island of the Miyako group) of the Ryukyu Archipelago. "In olden times," so runs the myth. "Miruku [Buddhist Bodhisattva Maitreya] was born on the island of Miyako. He was not handsome with drooping ears, but he had a beautiful heart; he provided the poor and needy with plenty of food and gave even children to the childless. One day, Saka-botoke [Śākyamuni, the Buddha] and Miruku-botoke [Maitreya, the Buddha] got into a big quarrel with each other, and they decided to settle the quarrel by watching who would be the first to see a flower of the peony tree come to full bloom; the one who would win

this flower contest should remain in Miyako and become its guardian, while the loser should leave the island for China and become its protecting god. In the meantime Miruku-botoke inadvertently fell into a doze, and it was Saka-botoke who was the first to see the blooming peony. Consequently, Miruku lost the contest and left Miyako for China, taking with him all kinds of delicious fruits growing on the island" (1971: 255, 1975: 286).

In retrospect, Miyata's publication of this story was a significant event in the history of folklore studies in the Ryukyus, for it anticipated the discovery of a remarkable number of variants of the myth after 1972 when these islands were restored to the Japanese Government. Japanese students of folktales, most notably, Professors A. Fukuda, H. Iwase, and S. Endō, have since been energetically engaged in collecting and analyzing myths, legends, and other folktales orally transmitted for decades (see, e.g., Fukuda 1979; Fukuda, Iwase, and Endō 1980; Iwase, Endō, and Fukuda 1983; Fukuda 1989). Among these tales are found those involving two Buddhist divinities, Maitreya and Śākyamuni, to which we shall return shortly. At the moment, let us attempt a brief analysis of the myth published by Miyata.

It comprises two motifs: (1) the motif of sharp conflict on matters of sovereignty that exists between Maitreya and Śākyamuni, a conflict that could be said to be almost on the verge of dualistic tension, and (2) the motif of the flower contest, by means of which this conflict or tension between the two divine rivals is dissolved; the one who would be the first to see a peony flower blossom in the midst of night should be the ruler over the island. Maitreya loses the contest because he falls asleep, and it is Śākyamuni who first discovers the blooming of the flower. In addition to these two motifs constituting the myth, one may also note the Messianic or paradisiacal images characterizing Maitreya. It is true that he is said to be ugly because of his drooping ears, a feature reminding us of that of Pu-tai, a fat, laughing,