

A Romantic Tribute to Sino-Japanese Closeness – The Legend of Yokihi



Author Mohan Gopal

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Introduction

Through the centuries, the relationship between Japan and the different empires and governments of China have ranged from harmony, mutual respect, and a high degree of socio-cultural and economic exchanges to outright war. While the basic nature of mankind is peace, regrettably aberrations occur because of what can be called “a veil of ignorance that clothes our eyes”. The reality that human nature is peace and joy must be brought to our awareness again and again, to reinforce those elements that can foster this very peace and joy, rather than battle and misery.

This article explores the impact that a Chinese legend of the 8th century has had in Japan, in the hope that this tale could be an element that fosters peace between the two ancient countries. Going through this article and the legend upon which it is based, the sagacious reader may well be inclined to wonder why an ancient people like the Japanese gave this story so much credence and a life of its own in their land. The answer may lie in the sensitivity and symbolism that characterizes all aspects of Japanese society and culture. Be it natural or man-made, locally born or an import, ancient or modern, subtle or gross, it is difficult to stumble upon anything in Japan which does not have a deep symbolic significance. It may not be so obvious to the casual onlooker but if one dives deeper into the finer details, it is bound to be seen.

Let us begin with the tale. At the end of the article, I shall return to its connection with Japanese symbolism.

The Legend of Yang Yuhuan

I chanced upon the story of Yang Yuhuan (who became the Lady Yang Guifei) in a film clip on YouTube, while exploring the connections between 8th century Japan and Tang China. Yang Yuhuan was one of the four legendary beauties of Ancient China. Most accounts say that she became the most beloved concubine of Emperor Xuanzong (c. early to mid-8th century AD). The emperor, enamoured by her ravishing beauty, is said to have taken her away for himself from his son, Prince Shou, to whom the young Yang Yuhuan had already been married. A combination of scandals surrounding the lady, the blind devotion of the emperor to his lead concubine – to the detriment of national governance – whom he had

elevated to the status of principal consort (the title of *Guifei*), palace jealousies, and a revolutionary *coup d'état* are supposedly and regrettably to have led to the emperor being forced to strangle his beloved.

As often happens in legends, there are many curious twists that are given to the narrator's tale and the story itself becomes fertile ground for fiction to grow upon. The YouTube video clip I had chanced upon was an imaginative and rather amusing story of a young man in modern-day Hong Kong who, following a traffic accident, suffers the hippocampal effect and goes through time travel into the past. When he regains consciousness in hospital, his brain has forgotten that it is in the 21st century and he becomes instead Lady Yang Guifei of the 8th century Tang Era, who not only is shocked at finding *herself* in strange surroundings wearing atrocious tight-fitting clothes (aka the modern young man) but sees his benefactor – the rich young architect and owner of the car that was involved in the accident – as *her* Prince Shou. The twist to the original story in this film is that the Lady Yang Guifei maintained a clandestine relationship with Prince Shou even after his father, Emperor Xuanzong, had taken her for his own (Ref: Yi Xu Yi *Nuo* (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fR5_IonDLP4&t=803s).

Yokihi Arrives in Japan

While the most frequent account of how Lady Yang Guifei met her tragic end seems to have been by strangling on the emperor's orders, the film depicts the cause as a deathly fall down a steep flight of steps on the grounds of the Tang imperial court (in present day Xian). A much more romantic version in Japan is that she did not breathe her last in China at all, but across the seas on the shores of Japan. About 800 kilometers southwest of Tokyo, in a remote corner of the Mukatsuku Peninsula in Yamaguchi Prefecture facing the rough Sea of Japan which separates the Asian bulkhead from Japan, is a site known as Yokihi's Landing Spot ([Photo 1](#)). *Yokihi* is the Japanese name for Yang Yuhuan. About 30 km from here through hilly wooded terrain and narrow roads on the same peninsula facing the calm Yuya Bay is the “Grave of Yokihi”, taken care of for 13 centuries by the adjoining Nison-in Temple ([Photo 2](#)).

The head priest of Nison-in Temple is the Reverend Chigyo Tadate,



Yokihi's Landing Spot

Photo 1: Author



The Grave of Yokihi

Photo 2: Author

in the classical Japanese of the times, describing the legend of Yokihi, of how she landed in Japan with two female attendants and how soon after arrival all three ladies passed away on the northern coast of the Mukatsuku Peninsula. The local people brought the bodies on horseback to the present location, where they were honorably buried with due rites. Rev. Tadate

60th in a hereditary line of head priests. He is a veritable treasure trove of historical content both on the temple and the legend of Yokihi. With great care and attention, he looks after the temple, its precincts, and the grave of Yokihi. Right in front of the temple is a courtyard with two open pavilions built to the specifications of classical Chinese Tang Era architecture. On an elevated spot in the small complex stands a giant statue of Yokihi elegantly carved in white ivory. The entire space, designed in Xian, is known as *Yokihi-no-Sato*, or Yokihi's Village, and is characterized by solemnity and simple elegance. It is a recent construction, supported by the Nagato municipality ostensibly to add touristic promotional value to the area. With typical Japanese sentimentality, the statue of Yokihi faces southwest, so that from her vantage position she can enjoy an undisturbed bird's-eye view across the sea towards her native land. Rev. Tadate is completely aware of the necessity to make the large financial investment incurred viable and sustainable for the long run. He has built on the premises a compact house, which offers temple lodgings under the name of *Shukubo Entoki*, with capacity to accommodate eight people. In addition to being spic and span and providing comfortable modern amenities within its Japanese architecture, he proffers to his guests authentic Japanese temple vegetarian fare (*shojin ryori*). Besides characteristic Japanese service, Rev. Tadate treats his guests to delightful lore surrounding both Yokihi and the Nagato region. An evening at *Shukubo Entoki* is both an informative and a relaxed experience.

The temple has in its archives two ancient hand-written chronicles carefully preserved through the centuries. These are titled *Nison-in Engi* ("The Oracles of Nison-in") and *Yokihiden* ("The Legend of Yokihi"). Rev. Tadate kindly brought these treasures out to show to me (Photo 3). To minimize handling of the originals, he keeps a copy of the chronicles and instead shows those to interested guests, of course informing them that they are viewing a certified copy. With gloved hands, he carefully opened the cypress boxes containing the books, pulled back the yellow satin protective cloth and daintily turned the yellowed pages of the books to read me passages written

took me to Yokihi's landing site and while there recounted a similar story about her arrival in Japan that appears in the chronicles of an equally ancient shrine, the Atsuta Jingu, about 600 km away to the northeast in distant Nagoya. He mentioned there were some differences in the details, though, a notable one being the type of vehicle used for ferrying the illustrious but defrocked passenger from China to Japan. While the chronicles at Nison-in mention that Yokihi and her attendants arrived on an ancient Chinese "sky boat" – it sounds touristic but far from that, this was a boat that was used for shipping out the dead – the chronicles at the Atsuta Shrine provided a less macabre version: that the boat was a regular Japanese trading ship and was in the command of Japanese traders returning to their homeland. Irrespective of the type of boat, it is completely understandable that after such an arduous journey a noble lady like Lady Yang Guifei was likely to call it a day.

Rev. Tadate concluded the informative time we had had together with an introduction to a local exponent on Yokihi, 79-year-old Takami Ito, founder and president of *Gyokusenkaku*, a hot spring inn in Nagato town, about 30 km from Nison-in. Ito developed a deep interest in Yokihi in particular, and about China in general, during the



Rev. Chigyo Tadate displaying the chronicles of Nison-in

Photo 3: Author



Takami Ito with artwork of the Palace of Yang Guifei in Xian in the background



Bathtub of Yokihi at Gyokusenkaku

heady economic bubble years of the 1980s (Photo 4). He befriended a television drama director-writer, Takaaki Ando, and the two men launched their Yokihi project. Ito would build a hot spring inn based on his favourite theme, trying to be as authentic as possible, which entailed considerable research and multiple visits to Xian. A venture of this level requires a substantial investment, and the young entrepreneur was able to raise a loan on the strength of his business proposition, his passion for the subject and his conviction about its viability. He commissioned artisans in Xian to design and construct authentic artefacts for his inn. The cornerstone of these is the inn's signature *ofuro*, or public bathtub. It was designed and built along the lines of what was described in Chinese lore as being the "Bathtub of Yang Guifei" (Photo 5). The inn upon its opening in 1991 made news and, despite an initial hands-off approach, was acclaimed as a symbol of Sino-Japanese friendship by the Chinese consul-general assigned to the region.

Ando, for his part, wrote and published a short Japanese novel titled *Yokihi ni koi wo shita otoko tachi* ("The Men who Loved Yokihi"). The book tells of Yokihi's story, especially in matters relating to her arrival in Japan and her "life" thereafter, in great detail with maps included. It is based on the chronicles preserved at Nison-in Temple. The men referred to in the book's title are not the innumerable ones who are likely to have fallen for the legendary beauty back in 8th century Tang China but are the men who were the pillars of the Yokihi project in Nagato during the 1980s. The book calls these men out, namely, Rev. Chishou Tadate (late father of the current head priest of Nison-in) who maintained the grave of Yokihi, Akira Nagahama, who detailed the specifications for the "Bath of Yokihi" and Tatsuro Kukita who designed the bath. Ito and the author himself are the remaining two men in the novel's title.

Yokihi in Japanese Literature & Arts

The tale of Yokihi was popular in Japan during the Nara Era (8th century AD) which had its capital in Nara followed by the Heian Era

which had its capital in Kyoto (8th century to 12th century AD). Catching the fancy of many a Japanese poet and author, it influenced several novels, most notable of which was *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji), a classic written in the early 11th century by a noblewoman, Lady Murasaki Shikibu. It tells the story of an emperor and his son, both of whom suffer endlessly from the sorrow of losing a loved one. A classic Chinese poem of those times was "The Song of Unending Sorrow" by Tang Era poet Bai Juyi. It tells the tale of Yang Guifei, including that part of her troubled life and death, where the emperor after recovering his kingdom is stricken with remorse for his brutal treatment of his beloved consort and tries to communicate with her

through the spiritual medium of a Taoist monk. The communication is successful as the monk returns from the mountains with a golden comb – which the emperor recognizes as that of his beloved – and a poignant message:

"On the seventh day of the seventh month in the Palace of Immortality, we shall fly in heaven as two birds with the wings of one and we shall grow together on earth as two branches of one tree... at some time, both (viz., heaven and earth) shall end, but this unending sorrow goes on forever."

This theme of two loved ones being separated forever and meeting on a specific day every year appears repeatedly in the literature of many cultures. One of these is the legend of the herdsman and the weaver girl represented by the stars Altair and Vega which are at their closest on the seventh day of the seventh month in the northern hemisphere, separated by the Milky Way. *The Tale of Genji* has the same theme. Across Japan to this day, the seventh day of the seventh month is celebrated as the *Tanabata* festival.

Another notable literary pursuit based on the tale of Yokihi was by the 20th century Japanese writer and recipient of the Akutagawa Award for literature Yasushi Inoue, who was supposedly enamoured of China. In 1963, he wrote a book titled "The Legend of Yokihi". It is indeed rather ironic that in 1923 he was drafted by the then military government in Japan into the Sino-Japanese War. Following the end of World War II in 1945, when peace once again prevailed in Japan, he was able to return to his core skill of writing.

Yokihi appears in a 1955 Japanese movie titled *Princess Yang Kwei Fei*, directed by the renowned Kenji Mizoguchi. The film was remade in Hong Kong in 1962 as *The Magnificent Concubine*. In 1991, Yokihi featured as the theme of a Kabuki dance drama of the same name, commissioned by famous exponent Tamasaburo Bando III (Ref: <https://www.martygrossfilms.com/films/kabuki/yokihi.html>).

These are just a few instances of the presence of Yokihi in Japanese arts and literature.

The Elevation of Yokihi

From a human being of incomparable beauty, Yokihi became deified in Japan in the image of the great goddess of compassion, Kannon. The temple of Sennyuji in Kyoto (<https://mitera.org/>), though not on the well-trodden path of an average tourist to the ancient capital, is credited with centuries of history and significance. It is one of the 33 sacred temples of Kyoto in the pilgrimage to temples dedicated to Goddess Kannon (*Saikoku Sanjuusancho*). It is also of particular significance to the Imperial Family, housing as it has through the centuries the remains of several of its members and accordingly enjoying the elevated status of *Mitera*, a sacred site for the Imperial Family.

Immediately, upon entering the main temple gate on to the path leading to the sanctum sanctorum, to the left is a small path (*Photo 6*) that leads to the shrine of Yokihi-Kannon. Enshrined here is an idol of the Goddess Kannon in the likeness of Yokihi. The lovely statue sculpted from Chinese sandalwood is said to have been made upon the orders of Emperor Xuanzong and brought to Sennyuji in 1255 by Tankai, a disciple of the Reverend Shunjo, the founder of the temple. The Shrine of Yokihi-Kannon is looked upon as a power spot, especially by ladies yearning to enhance their physical beauty.

While at Nison-in, Rev. Tadate had mentioned that the chronicles say that a statue of Yokihi was brought from China to the temple of Seiryuji in Kyoto (<http://seiryuji.or.jp/>), also an ancient temple which had strong connections to the Tang Empire during the 8th century. Whether the statue at Sennyuji is the same one which got relocated from neighboring Seiryuji, whether it is a completely different one, or if the names of the temples sounding similar got erroneously modified in the chronicles, is difficult to say. That Yokihi as a mystic power for beauty is ubiquitous in Japan is, however, obvious.

The Ending

The 18th-century English poet John Keats opens his famous poem *Endymion* with these lines:

*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep*

The poem talks of beauty as a source of everlasting joy, unceasing and ever growing. Yet, the same beauty signifies silence and deep rest. There is an ancient Indian description of nature as being, *Satyam, Shivam* and *Sundaram*, literally translating into English as Truth, Transcendence and Beauty. Truth is that which never changes – that which is eternal. Transcendence is infinitely dynamic stillness



Path leading to the Shrine of Goddess Yokihi-Kannon



Goddess Yokihi-Kannon

or still dynamism. Eternity, Transcendence and Beauty merge forming Nature. Nature is synonymous with beauty.

Beauty cannot be analyzed, nor can it be possessed of. The moment one tries to do so, it vanishes. Yet it is eternal. Such may be seen in the Legend of Yokihi. Yang Yuhuan lived over 13 centuries ago, but her beauty lives on in Japan in an ethereal form of elevated consciousness (*Photo 7*).

At the beginning of this article, I had pondered upon the Legend of Yokihi and Japanese symbolism. What is it that has made this tale so attractive to the Japanese psyche, to the extent that it has become engrained in its mythology? Could it be the transcendence of beauty? That something so beautiful can be both ephemeral and permanent. There are innumerable such paradoxical associations in Japanese culture, including the seasons, marked by flowers and associated events. To give an example, the cherry-blossom is the flower of spring. From the barren branches of winter, a riot of delicate creams and whites bloom across the land during March-April. Seasons mark change. In spring, children graduate and start on their next step in life, be it school or work. There is a pang of sorrow in separation, but it is complemented by a new wave of enthusiasm in what the future holds in store. After a few weeks, the blossoms fall or are gently blown away by the wind. They vanish as suddenly as they appeared. The trees are ready to put forth verdant new green foliage for summer. This natural phenomenon repeats year after year. The cherry blossoms are transient, yet permanent.

One can raise many questions from a logical angle regarding the tale being fact or fiction. However, that is a moot point of view, and it would be a saner approach to not let excessive analysis take over the narrative. If fiction can lead to peace and understanding, so be it. It is in any case the very nature of humankind.

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Mohan Gopal is an IT professional living in Tokyo since 1991. He is a multi-culture specialist, teacher and sales coach and is closely associated with global humanitarian organization The Art of Living as representative director in Japan.