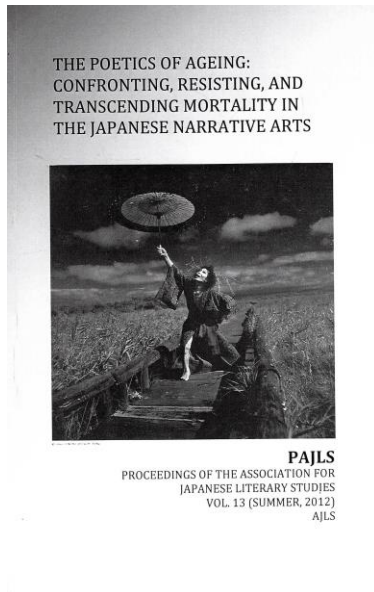


“Obasuteyama: Care or Abandonment”

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Introduction

Is there grace in aging? Is there any obligation to support one's elderly parents? Aging into decrepitude has long been perceived as a burden to society. Fukuzawa Shichirō's fictional novel *The Ballad of Narayama* (檜山節考 *Narayama-bushi kō*, 1956) depicts the unfortunate but inevitable need for elderly abandonment to ensure the village's survival through the food-depleted harsh winter. *The Ballad of Narayama* is an adaptation of the famous legend "Obasuteyama," in which a nephew tries to abandon his aunt on the top of a mountain. The legend "Obasuteyama" is intriguing as it is retold in various versions over different time periods. Yanagita Kunio delineates the major story types and traces the Chinese and Indian influences in his essay "Oyasuteyama" (Mountain of Abandoning Parent) from 1945.¹

The current paper follows Yanagita's study and attempts to trace Indian influence by examining the instances of elderly abandonment tales in *Konjaku monogatari shū* (circa 1120). There are previous studies on the influence of Indic stories on Japanese images and tales.² I highlight the possibility that the motif of *obasute*, which is strongly associated with Japanese folklore, may derive from stories of Indian origins. In particular, I draw comparison to the Buddhist text *Za bao zang jing* (『雜寶藏經』, "The Sutra of the Collection of Varied Jewels," 472) as preserved in *Fa yuan zhu lin* (『法苑珠林』, "The Dharma Treasure Grove,"

¹ Yanagita Kunio, *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū*, vol. 21 (Chikuma shobō, 1979), 294-305.

² Ikegami Jun'ichi has taken the familiar Japanese image of the rabbit in the moon and traced the origin to Chinese records and the Indian Jataka tale collection. See Ikegami Jun'ichi, "Tenjiku kara kita setsuwa – tsuki no usagi," in *Konjaku monogatari shū no sekai: chūsei no akebono* (Ibunsha, 1999), 142-176. Suneera Khurana has researched the influence of Indic tales on tales of animals in *Konjaku monogatari shū*. Suneera Khurana, "Influence of Indic tales on animal tales in *Konjaku monogatari shū*" (MA thesis, University of Colorado, 2009).

668). I identify the various motives, resolutions, and discourses present in the three tales of elderly abandonment and their possible sources. Specifically, the wisdom of the elderly, filial piety toward one's decrepit parents, and love toward one's guardian are the values that counter the impulse to abandon one's parents. I propose that the different discourses may be results of the progression of aging through early, mid, and late old-age.

Elderly abandonment in *Konjaku monogatari*

There are three tales of abandonment of the elderly in the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese sections of the *Konjaku monogatari*, the largest collection of Buddhist and secular *setsuwa* (didactic and anecdotal tales). In the introduction to *Kōshō Konjaku monogatari* (『攷証今昔物語集』), Haga Yaichi (1867-1927) remarks that a comparison of the three tales shows traces of how the story of elderly abandonment changes with time and country.³ In the Indian section, tale 5.32, a government official is able to change the existing custom of sending people more than seventy years old to the country of abandoned elderly when his secretly-hidden elderly mother provides wise answers to puzzling questions that the neighboring country posed, thereby saving the country from the threat of invasion. In the Chinese section, tale 9.45, a child named Hou Gu saves his grandfather from being abandoned by his father by cautioning that he will be ready to abandon his own father when he ages. In the Japanese section, tale 30.9, a man persuaded by his wife, tries to abandon his elderly aunt by leaving her on top of a mountain, but decides to continue to support his aunt and brings her home.

In *Mura to gakudō* (Village and Pupils, 1945), Yanagita analyzes the *Konjaku* stories by noting the pattern and phenomena of elderly abandonment found in legends. He considers the Indian tale (5.32) and Chinese tale (9.45) as distinctly foreign tales that emphasize wisdom of the elderly and filial piety of the offspring.⁴ The Indian tale originates from the Buddhist scripture *Za bao zang*

³ Haga Yaichi, ed., *Kōshō Konjaku monogatari* vol. 1 (Fuzanbō, 1913), 17.

⁴ Yanagita Kunio, *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū* vol. 21, 295-96.

jing, which highlights wisdom of the elderly and praises filial acts of the son. The integration of the elderly abandonment motif with the difficult-problem didactic tales (難題說話) in the Indian section tale advocates that the wise elderly are of value to society. As a story-telling technique, Yanagita believes that even though the idea of elderly abandonment may seem implausible to children, they become drawn to the story because of the desire to find out the answers to difficult questions.⁵ He also points out that there are Japanese folktales based on the Chinese tale that has served as an example of filial piety since the ancient times. Yanagita finds the Japanese tale (30.9) to be an indigenized filial tale that is influenced by both Indian and Chinese filial tales that found their way to Japan hundreds of years ago.⁶

Tale Prototype: “The Sutra of the Collection of Varied Jewels” in *Fa yuan zhu lin*

In considering how *setsuwa* from China and India were interpreted by the Japanese, it is helpful to consider Terakawa Machio’s explanation that *setsuwa* were part of the foreign culture that the ruling class in Japan eagerly and systematically adopted.⁷ Terakawa points out that foreign tales become completely indigenized in cases where local folklore adapted Buddhist didactic tales.⁸ One example of such indigenization can be found in the Chinese tale about the filial son Tanzi (鄰子) of the Zhou dynasty, which is an adaption of *Pu sa shan zi jing* (菩薩睽子經), translated from the Indian tale *Śyāmajātaka* in the Pāli collection of *Jātaka* stories.⁹

⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁶ Ibid., 300.

⁷ Terakawa Machio, “Setsuwa no gairai to dochaku,” in *Setsuwa to wa nani ka* (Benseisha, 1991), 248-51.

⁸ Ibid., 261.

⁹ Kenneth K. S. Chen, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 20, 23. See also *Pu sa shan zi jing* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T03n0174_p0436b03, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T03/0174_001.htm.

In the original *Pu sa shan zi jing*, a bodhisattva reincarnates himself to become the son of a childless blind elderly couple in order to help them

One remarkable characteristic of the *Konjaku* is the number of Chinese Buddhist sources consulted in the adapted stories. In the present study, I examine the stories in *Za bao zang jing*, or “The Sutra of the Collection of Varied Jewels” that Haga Yaichi identified as the source of the tale in the Indian section. Although the original source is from “The Sutra of the Collection of Varied Jewels,” translated in 472 by priests Ji Jiaye (吉迦夜) and Tan Yao (曇曜), select passages from that sutra are recorded in *Fa yuan zhu lin*, or “The Dharma Treasure Grove,” completed in 668 by the Tang priest Dao Shi (道世).¹⁰ It is a large compilation of both Indian scriptures and Chinese texts totaling 100 scrolls with 100 subject headings. Katayose Masayoshi points out that the scope and organization of *Fa yuan zhu lin* is truly astounding for its time.¹¹ Haga refers to the version of the story found in *Fa yuan zhu lin*, possibly because *Za bao zang jing* was not directly available. Based on the conservative estimates from Haga Yaichi’s work on sources of *Konjaku* tales, 34% of tales from the Indian and Chinese sections in *Konjaku* are adapted from *Fa yuan zhu lin*.¹² The source of the abandonment of elderly tales

live in the mountains as part of their Buddhist practice. The son covers himself in deer skin when he fetches water from the mountain water springs, so as not to frighten other wild animals. However, a king on a hunting expedition, perceiving the son to be a real deer, shoots him. Before his death, the son requests the king to look after his parents. In the adapted Chinese tale, there is no emphasis on the blind parents leading a life of Buddhist practice. Tan zi’s parents crave for deer milk, and Tan zi wears deer skin so that he can milk a doe. In the process, Tan zi notices that a hunter is about to shoot him. Tan zi reveals his human form, averts a tragedy, and explains to the hunter that he wore deer skin in order to obtain deer milk for his parents.

¹⁰ Robert Brower, “The Konzyaku monogataryū: An Historical and Critical Introduction, with Annotated Translations of Seventy-Eight Tales” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1952), 18, 23.

¹¹ Katayose Masayoshi, *Konjaku monogataryū no kenkyū* (Kamakura: Geirinsha, 1974), 456.

¹² *Ibid.*, 454.

is in scroll 49 under the section heading of “Unfilial.”¹³ I compare the *Konjaku* tales with their sources in *Fa yuan zhu lin* in the following sections. I point to two additional tales in the Unfilial section, originally from *Za bao zang jing* that may also have been sources for *Konjaku* tales in the Chinese and Japanese sections.

Indian Section: Wisdom

In *Konjaku* tale 5.32, a certain state in India has the practice of sending people older than seventy to another country. A high government official, unable to bear sending his mother away, hides her secretly underground in the house. Several years pass, a neighboring country sends two female horses and threatens to attack if the country cannot distinguish the parent and child between the horses. The official consults with his mother in hiding and finds out that the horse that eats later while grazing is the mother. A second threat comes, challenging the country to distinguish between the bottom and top end of a wooden log. The mother tells the official that the end that sinks in the water would be the bottom. A third challenge asks how to determine the weight of an elephant. The official informs the king to place the elephant on a boat, mark the water level on the side of the boat, then replace the elephant with stones while keeping water-level mark the same, and measure the weight of the stones. The neighboring country praises the wisdom of that country and stops threatening them. The king becomes curious about how the official is able to solve the challenge every time, and the official confesses that it is his mother in hiding who knows the solutions. The king then changes the law and calls back the elderly who were sent away. The country of elderly abandonment then comes to be known as the country that supports the elderly.

In the above tale, the conflict centers on the rivalry between two nations in the form of a riddle competition. The wisdom of the elderly is emphasized and the presence of a filial son in the capacity of a government official is crucial to channel the knowledge of the elderly to serve and protect the country. The

¹³ *Fa yuan zhu lin* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T53n2122_p0661c26, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T53/2122_049.htm.

fact that the officials are able to persuade the ruler to change the regulation of sending the elderly away reflects the attitude that people are valued above the law and rules are not set in stone. Only a few years have passed from the time when the elderly mother is kept in hiding. Given her sharp judgment and resourcefulness, the elderly mother in the tale is probably in her early old-age, before the onset of serious illnesses that can compromise her intellect. The son respects his mother and values her opinion very much. However, there is an underlying message that the decision to accept and support the elderly appears to be contingent on the utility-value in the wisdom held by the elderly.

Haga notes that the source of the above tale is found in fascicle 49 of *Fa yuan zhu lin*, under the title of “Abandoning One’s Father.”¹⁴ Given the identical plots, characters, and riddles, “Abandoning One’s Father” is the indisputable source of *Konjaku* 5.32. Instead of an intimidating neighboring country, a heavenly god poses threats on the country in order to correct its cruel behavior of abandoning its elderly. The notable Buddhist characteristic in *Fa yuan zhu lin* lies in the imagery of hell is used to illicit fear of retribution when one fails to observe Buddhist precepts. The horse, wooden log, and elephant questions seen previously are included as part of nine riddles in this story.¹⁵ The additional riddles are more abstract, such as the following. “Who has the name of being awake but sleeps, who has the name of being asleep but is awake?” “How can a scoop of water be greater than the sea?” “Can there be anyone hungrier than one (heavenly god in disguise) suffering famine?” “Can there be anyone suffering more than one (heavenly god in disguise) with severe burns?” And “Is there anyone more beautiful than a fair woman (heavenly god in disguise)?” After all, *Fa yuan zhu lin* is a

¹⁴ *Fa yuan zhu lin* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T53n2122_p0661c26, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T53/2122_049.htm. See also *Za bao zang jing* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T04n0203_p0449a26, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T04/0203_001.htm.

¹⁵ Terakawa Machio, “Setsuwa no gairai to dochaku,” in *Setsuwa to wa nani ka* (Benseisha, 1991), 261-62.

Buddhist text, and its main function to preach Buddhist teachings; thus filial piety is preached as a virtue that accumulates one's karmic merits. In the adaptation, the threat of punishment from the heavenly god for abandoning the elderly is lost, replaced with rivaling countries. *Konjaku's* rendition uses only the easy-to-understand riddles, probably indicative of the intended audience of commoners.

Chinese Section: Filial Piety

In *Konjaku* tale 9.45 of the Chinese section, tells of a certain Hou Gu of Chu province. His father becomes weary of supporting Hou Gu's grandfather, and attempts to abandon him. Hou Gu's father builds a palanquin and carries his father to a mountain. Hou Gu accompanies them to the top of the mountain. When the father gets ready to leave, Hou Gu picks up the palanquin. His father questions Hou Gu on why he is bringing back the palanquin. Hou Gu replies that when the father becomes old, he can use the same palanquin to bring him up to the mountain instead of building a new one. The father becomes afraid that he too will be abandoned. He decides to bring back the grandfather and serve him filially. Thereafter, Hou Gu is known both as a filial son and grandson who saved his grandfather.¹⁶

A similar motif from the story of Hou Gu can also be found in story 16 of *Za bao zang jing*, also compiled in fascicle 49 of *Fa yuan zhu lin*, grouped under "Abandoning One's Father."¹⁷ In the country of Boluo'na, there is a custom of making the elderly over 60 years old guard entrances of homes. The older brother

¹⁶ The same story is also found in *Chūkōsen* (注好選, prior to 1152), but the grandson is known as Yuan Gu (原谷) instead of Hou Gu (厚谷). Terakawa points out that the story originates from *Kōshiden* (孝子傳), from the Western Han dynasty (206 BC - 24).

¹⁷ *Fa yuan zhu lin* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T53n2122_p0662c12, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T53/2122_049.htm. See also *Za bao zang jing* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T04n0203_p0456b23, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T04/0203_002.htm. From here on, I refer this story as "Boluo'na."

orders the younger brother to bring a mat to their 60-year-old father so that he can guard the front door. The younger brother cuts the mat into two pieces and brings one to the father, and tells him, “The older brother ordered me to give this to you; he wants you to guard the door.” The older brother asks the younger brother why he didn’t give the entire mat to their father. The younger brother replies that if he gave the entire mat to their father, where can he obtain a mat next time? The older brother asks why he needs another mat, to which the younger brother answers that he is saving it for the older brother, so that when he ages, his son can make him sit on the mat and guard the door. The older brother is stunned to think that he will also have to guard the door when he becomes old. Both brothers come to the agreement that the custom is awful and visit the prime minister seeking amendment of the law. The prime minister replies that everyone has elderly parents and agrees to change the practice.

The central twist in these two stories comes from fear—the unfilial son is afraid of being maltreated when he ages, and therefore changes his behavior and becomes a filial son. In comparison, *Konjaku* tale 9.45 collapses the characters directly, involving the grandfather, father, and son, thereby creating a more straightforward story. Furthermore, the confrontation occurs between son and father in *Konjaku* tale 9.45, rather than between brothers, thus creating more tension. The *Konjaku* tale relies upon the story element of sending the elderly away, instead of imposing forced labor on the elderly. The custom of making the elderly guard doors exists to extract utility from the elderly in the story “*Boluo’na*.” As with *Konjaku* 5.32, the brothers rely on an external authority to change the customs and practices of the country. In *Konjaku* 9.45, however, the decision to abandon the grandfather appears to be personal on the father’s part, thus, the act can be reversed on the individual level without consulting authority figures. The overarching motif is purely the ideology of filial piety. There are no existing customs to abandon the elderly, and individuals who want to abandon their elders are heavily discouraged on the basis that they themselves will be abandoned in the future.

Unlike the Indian tale in the previous section, where the adaptation uses the same plot, characters, and even the detailed riddles, it is difficult to establish the Chinese tale about Hou Gu as an adaptation of the “Boluo’na” tale in *Za bao zang jing*. There are similar elements of maltreatment of the father, in terms of abandonment and forced labor. The palanquin and the mat function as both agents of maltreatment and tokens of fear. The wit of the young grandson and younger brother saves the elderly from being maltreated. Although the similarities between the “Boluo’na” tale of *Za bao zang jing* and Hou Gu may be merely coincidental, nonetheless, the lack of respect toward the elderly is revealed in both stories. While the “Boluo’na” tale establishes the father’s age as 60, there is no explicit mention of age in the Chinese tale. Of course, age is only relative, since the rate of aging varies depending on the individual. Based on the sons’ disregard for their fathers, one can infer that perhaps the elderly fathers are in their mid old-age. The elderly’s mind is not as sharp and fast, but he is still capable of some physical labor, and is not entirely frail. The discourse of filial piety encourages people to continue to respect their elderly parents, even if they are not as able as before.

Japanese Section: *Aware*

The legend “Obasuteyama” about a man who tried to abandon his aunt on the Kamuri Mountain in Sarashina (Nagano) is especially well-known and the mountain became associated with the *utamakura*, Obasuteyama. “Obasuteyama” differs from the tales on elderly abandonment in the previous two sections in that the elderly abandoned is not one’s direct parents, but an aunt who acts as a substitute parent. Yanagita conjectures that the story was probably about abandoning one’s mother, but it may have been perceived as much too terrible and therefore was altered to one’s aunt, even though the plot of abandoning a parent-substitute still gives the same unpleasant effect.¹⁸ Yanagita also explains that in

¹⁸ Yanagita, *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū*, vol. 21, 301. “この文学の中では、棄てられた人が親では無くて、伯母だったといふことになつて居る。是は多分母親を山へ棄てたといふのを、あんまりな話と思つて変へたのかも知れぬが、小さい時に母を失つて、親代りに育ててくれた伯母だったといふから、穏やかで無いことは同じである。”

old Japanese, *uba* is used to refer both to a mother and any respectable older woman (婦人), and in the countryside, people called their mother by *uba*, *uma*, or *appa*. It was only in Kyoto that the habit of addressing mother as *uba* ceased early on.¹⁹

In *Konjaku* tale 30.9, a man living at Sarashina in Shinano Province supports his ailing aunt in her old age, as though she was his own mother. However, over the years, his wife grows to dislike the aunt, and often complains about her. Eventually, the man submits to the wife's urging to abandon the aunt deep in the mountains. On the fifteenth night of the eighth month, he pretends to take his aunt to a Buddhist service, and carries her to the top of a mountain. At a distant peak, where she cannot walk back, he puts her down and runs away. Even though the aunt cries out for him, he ignores her entreaties and runs home. At home, he reflects on the years the aunt, like a mother, lived with them, and feels deeply saddened to have abandoned her. Looking out to the bright moon, he utters, "Viewing the moon / Shining over Mt. Obasute / Of Sarashina, / Unable to console / My sad heart." (ワガココロ / ナグサメカネテ / サラシナヤ / ヲバステ山ニ / テルツキヨミテ) He goes back to the mountain top and brings back his aunt, and continues to support her like a mother. The ending message of this story in *Konjaku* states that Mt. Obasute refers to Mt. Kamuri, originally named so because the mountain top looks like a crown. The emphasis of the Japanese tale is on the invoked sentimentality of *aware* when the nephew becomes sad thinking about his aunt, whom he has just abandoned.

The poem above is included in *Kokin wakashū* (914), poem 878 in the miscellaneous section. It is grouped with other miscellaneous poems about the moon. The poem possibly could have been composed by a traveler who visited Mount Obasute in Sarashina. As a result of this poem, Mount Obasute is associated with inconsolable sadness and also as a place famous for moon-viewing. The story and this poem also appears in *Yamato monogatari* (~951), and Donald Keene points out that as with other poems in *Yamato monogatari*, the poem likely existed first and the story was created to explain the background leading to the

¹⁹ Ibid., 301.

poem.²⁰ In addition, the poem may have originated from the place-name of Obatsuse (小長谷, 小初瀬), which became Obasute after a sound change, based on folk etymology.

Konjaku tale 30.9 differs from 5.32 and 9.45 in that the act to abandon the elderly aunt is neither driven by an existing custom nor self-motivated, but is influenced by persuasion from the wife. The elderly aunt is probably in her late old-age, since the wife has already been taking care of her for many years, as described in the text, “the old woman aged further as her back was terribly bent.”²¹ The wife is the apparent malefactor who makes the husband get rid of the elderly. Michelle Li, in her analysis of the story, points out that although the wife may be deceptive and cruel, the hardship in taking care of the elderly should also be acknowledged.²² Here, I would like to raise the possibility that tale 30.9 is influenced by a story titled “Disobedient Woman” in fascicle 49 of *Fa yuan zhu lin*, or story 112 of *Za bao zang jing*.²³

“Disobedient Woman” is a morbid story about a violent woman scheming to get rid of her mother-in-law. She lacks propriety and often acts against the mother-in-law. She becomes hateful of the mother-in-law who criticizes her faults. Eventually, she convinces her foolish husband to kill his mother. The husband brings his mother out into the open wild, and ties her hands and feet. When he is about to kill her, lightning strikes and kills him, as a punishment from heaven for his intended crime. The mother returns home, and the wife, assuming it’s the husband, asks

²⁰ Donald Keene, *Landscapes and Portraits* (Kodansha International, 1971), 125.

²¹ Yoshiko Kurata Dykstra, *The Konjaku Tales: From a Medieval Japanese Collection, Japanese Section Vol. 3* (Osaka: Kansai Gaidai University, 2003), 308.

²² Michelle Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 181.

²³ *Fa yuan zhu lin* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T53n2122_p0661c17, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T53/2122_049.htm. See also *Za bao zang jing* in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, T04n0203_p0493b21, accessed February 13, 2012, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T04/0203_009.htm.

whether he killed the mother. The mother replies “already killed,” and the wife finds out the next day that the husband has died. The didactic message preaches that unfilial acts are punished immediately and the suffering in hell is even greater.

The “Disobedient Woman” story is more gruesome in that the wife persuades the husband to kill his mother. The tension, dislike, or hate that exists between the wife and her mother-in-law is common across cultures. Therefore, it is difficult to claim that the story of “Disobedient Woman” served as a direct source to the *obasute* poem in *Kokinshū* or *Yamato monogatari*. The tragic event of a son murdering his own mother is prevented through heavenly intervention in “Disobedient Woman.” The act of elderly abandonment in the Japanese tale is reversed when the man is filled with sentiments of *aware*, unable to leave his aunt on the mountain. In the late old-age stage, when the elderly is neither wise, nor physically capable, the burden of elderly care increases substantially, thus the discourses of elderly wisdom and filial piety may not be enough to advocate the continual need to care for the elderly. Rather, the desire to continue elderly care needs to come from within the heart, as the nephew has done, reflecting on all the years that he has spent with his aunt, who has always acted like a real parent to him. He could not bear to abandon his aunt on the mountain and brings her home and continues to support her.

Conclusion

As explained by Yanagita, the central influence on this collection of stories on elderly abandonment is the tale of “Abandoning One’s Father” in *Fa yuan zhu lin*. The two stories “Boluo’na” and “Disobedient Wife” in *Fa yuan zhu lin* share similarities with the Chinese tale and Japanese tale in the *Konjaku*. Given that the Chinese source of *Kōshiden* dates back to the Han dynasty, it is unlikely that the Indic tale in *Fa yuan zhu lin* influenced the Chinese tale. The issue of the disobedient wife is a universal problem; therefore it is difficult to say that the Indic tale was a definitive prototype for the Japanese tale. We can only conjecture that if the Heian Japanese first read the Indian tale “Abandoning One’s Father” from *Fa yuan zhu lin*, then they probably also read “Boluo’na” and “Disobedient Woman” at the

same time. There may have been indirect influence from the unfilial stories as a result of close association.

In the Indian tale in the *Konjaku*, the motif of elderly abandonment comes from a traditional practice of uncertain origin and era, therefore, the action itself may be considered innocent, since the people of that country had been abandoning the elderly in the past without questioning the morality of such action. However, in the Chinese tale, the father of Hou Gu is the culprit who wants to abandon his father when he becomes tired of taking care of the elderly. On the other hand, the wife is the one who persuades the husband to abandon the elderly aunt in the Japanese tale. The elderly parent sheltered from abandonment by the filial son in the Indian tale has the voice of wisdom, offering answers to the tricky riddles, whereas the elderly in the Chinese and Japanese tale are voiceless and potential victims of abandonment.

In comparing the three tales, aging can be graceful, in the stage of early old-age, when the elderly parent is still wise and knowledgeable, and commands the respect of his children. However, as aging continues into the stages of mid and late old-age, the elderly loses the respect of the children. The discourse of filial piety becomes a crucial factor that encourages people to continue to support their elderly parents, who have declined in their mental and physical health. Care for an elderly in the late old-age stage, when they have grown weak and frail, requires the greatest commitment. The discourse of *aware* brings about sympathy for the elderly in the son and reinforces his resolve to support the elderly. At the root of such sentiment lie fond memories of the many years that the elderly had spent raising him.

Yanagita points out that although the thought of elderly abandonment may be shocking at first, the disturbing title acts as an attention grabber, and the contents of the tale actually advocate filial piety.²⁴ Inoue Yasushi recalls in his autobiographical short story that as a child, listening to “Obasuteyama” and imagining parting from his mother, he became filled with sadness and cried uncontrollably.²⁵ Does the “Obasuteyama” title intend to frighten people as to make the tale impressive and unforgettable? Li

²⁴ Yanagita, *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū*, vol. 21, 294.

²⁵ Inoue Yasushi, *Obasute* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1967), 8.

explains that, in another tale of *Konjaku*, “How the Mother of Hunters Becomes a Demon and Tries to Devour Her Child,” the elderly parent is perceived as a burden. Casting the old mother as a demon reveals “the frustration, anger, and ambivalence of grown children faced with the task of caring for a parent whose mind and body are deteriorating.”²⁶ Then, does the tale of “Obasuteyama” serve as a way to find relief when one faces the burden of elderly care? The story functions as a virtual alternative contemplating the abandonment of the elderly. Just the thought of the possibility of abandoning one’s elderly parents is enough to ease the tension in a family and prevent dreadful and irreversible consequences. The urge to abandon one’s elderly father or mother may always exist, but when given a choice, the grown child still chooses to support his elderly parent. Although *The Ballad of Narayama* emphasizes the unfortunate and inevitable circumstances that justify elderly abandonment, the actual abandonment does not occur in Japanese folklore.

The burden of elderly care has been a perennial predicament faced by people of all regions and time periods. *Konjaku* may reflect a Japanese attitude toward elderly care that differed from that of India and China as perceived by the Heian Japanese. The Indian tale emphasizes elderly wisdom in changing the custom to abandon the elderly. The Chinese tale heightens the virtue of filial piety to amend the unfilial son’s plan to abandon his father. The Japanese tale accentuates the parent-child bond and the sadness felt by the nephew, who then reverses the original decision to abandon the aunt. Naomi Fukumori points out that “the tale is made even more poignant by the fact that the aunt, although *not* the actual parent of the man, nevertheless nurtures and loves the man like a parent. His turning his back on such a generous and compassionate woman thus makes his abandonment of her more damning.”²⁷ The tales share similarities with those in *Za bao zang jing* and serve as didactic teachings to pay respect and care for the elderly, as preached by the Buddhist precepts and Confucius morals. The problem of elderly care is not only addressed through

²⁶ Li, 180.

²⁷ Naomi Fukumori, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2011.

Buddhist preaching and Confucian ideology, but also through individual realizations of and gratitude toward parental love.

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