

BOOK REVIEWS

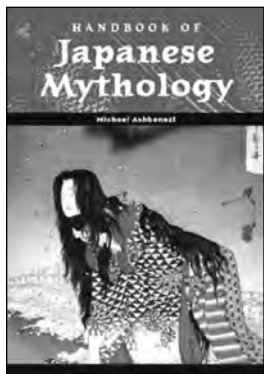
Handbook of Japanese Mythology

BY MICHAEL ASHKENAZI

SANTA BARBARA: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2003

375 PAGES, HARDCOVER: ISBN 1-57607-467-6

WEB SITE: WWW.ABC-CLIO.COM



The task of compiling a handbook about Japanese mythology is a daunting one. As Michael Ashkenazi cautions in the preface to his *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, issues connected with mythology are politically and socially vibrant, and “the views the reader will encounter will often be contentious and conflicting” (*HJM*, Preface, xvii). Nonetheless, Ashkenazi has produced a fascinating work that provides

excellent insight into a component of Japanese culture that both informs about and is deeply embedded in daily life, ritual, and history. The handbook is one of nine titles in ABC-CLIO’s *Handbooks of World Mythology* series.

It is useful at the outset to understand how Ashkenazi defines the word “myth.” Readers who tend to divorce the imaginary, fanciful, archaic quality of mythology from more documented, factual history or even institutionalized religious belief will be struck by the comprehensiveness of the topics covered. Myth is defined in two ways: the first is stories, both epic and brief, with a supernatural element; the second, perhaps more importantly, posits myth as “an intellectual component that provides a structure to people’s lives . . . ways in which people explain to themselves who they are, what they are doing, and why” (p. 3). This latter definition opens the door to a meaningful study of the interrelationship between a culture’s world view and traditions and the events that affect that culture as a whole. Indeed, it allows one to better understand how any culture shapes and conceives its collective identity at a particular moment in time. Ashkenazi’s task here is ambitious, and his efforts must be appreciated in that context. In one sense, he is *contributing* to the mythology he explores!

The expansive Introduction, which explains the main concepts of Japanese mythology and belief systems in social, political, and historical context is, by itself, an excellent resource for students of Japanese culture. Ashkenazi delineates the origins and central components of Shintō and Buddhism, the individuals and deities that developed and sustained them, and the complex ways in which the traditions of these two religions began to merge. He stresses the importance of the *Kojiki* (circa 712 CE) and the *Nihonshoki* (circa 720 CE), two compilations of historical and mythological accounts of Japanese origins and the beginning of the imperial period. These sources provide detailed and sometimes differing views of the same

. . . Ashkenazi has produced a fascinating work that provides excellent insight into a component of Japanese culture that both informs about and is deeply embedded in daily life, ritual, and history.

events, with the latter reflecting more Chinese influences and including events related to the introduction of Buddhism. Both works become crucial to the development of a *national* history and mythology during later periods, often to justify the aims and actions of the controlling elites.

The second chapter, “Mythic Time and Space,” details Japanese creation mythology and concludes with a useful dual timeline in which both historical and mythological periods, events, and personalities are aligned. “Deities, Themes, and Concepts” in Japanese mythology are presented alphabetically in the third chapter, which, after close reading of the substantial Introduction, can seem repetitive in places. Of course, as this is essentially a reference book, most readers are likely to *consult* the third chapter rather than include it in a straight ahead read-through as I did. The fourth chapter lists useful Web sites and other resources for research into Japanese culture. Ashkenazi develops a clear, accessible structure for organizing and classifying complex and interrelated elements of history, social life, religion, and ritual. The result is commendable, enabling productive inquiry into a multitude of topics.

The origins and geographic migration of certain popular deities is an intriguing topic that emerges in the *Handbook*. The origins of Amida Nyorai, the contemplative and compassionate Buddha of the Pure Land, may be tied to the Persian-Zoroastrian god of light, Ahura Mazda. The two deities share common identifying attributes and similar rituals, most notably those involving the attainment of salvation by the repetition of expressions of praise. T’ang China’s contacts with Persia facilitated the movement of this major deity across Asia. In her original form, the compassionate bodhisattva Kannon, often shown with the Amida Nyorai, is the Indian Buddhist saint Avalokiteshvara. Her image likewise passes through China to Japan. Such centuries-old spiritual links between Japan and India, and even the Middle East, might surprise the reader who may know of Chinese influences on Japan but might not imagine the earlier, more distant connections.

Insight about the roles and status of women in Japanese culture can also be gained from the *Handbook*. The reader learns about the female co-creator deity (*kami*) Izanami, whose union with her sibling co-creator Izanagi gives birth to the islands of Japan and thirty-five other deities. Izanami’s death and removal to the contaminated underworld leads to an unsuccessful pursuit by her sibling-spouse, and, in the process, many other important offspring deities are created from her decaying body. Izanagi purifies himself after his ordeals in the underworld, and in so doing brings forth the sun goddess Amaterasu-o-mikami, a seminal figure in the Shintō pantheon and ancestress of the imperial line, who is identified with the symbol of Japan itself. The reader also learns the story of the Ukemochi-no-

kami, who offers rice from her mouth and other orifices to her guest, the brother of Amaterasu. Perceiving this food as polluted, he murders her, and Ukemochi's decaying body generates many additional vital foodstuffs. Ashkenazi makes the interesting point that while female deities and women's roles in archaic Japan are identified in part with the provision and preparation of essential foods, food creation itself is linked with the impurity of female bodily decay; women thereby come to be viewed as more impure than men. This is "as neat a put-down of women as can be found anywhere" (p. 80), Ashkenazi notes. Tension between the pure and the impure is paramount in Shintō belief, so the implication of this characterization of women is profound. The concept of male dominance, further reinforced in Chinese traditions that arrived with Confucianism and Buddhism in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, continues in Japanese culture today. It endures, Ashkenazi reminds, despite the fact that women held great political and religious power in archaic Japan, ruled with support of husbands and brothers, and even inherited.

The *Handbook of Japanese Mythology* is highly recommended for upper level secondary and college students. It is an excellent resource for teachers of Japanese culture and history at any level. It is helpful to have a working knowledge of Japanese culture and history before reading the *Handbook*, but Ashkenazi's well-developed, detailed Introduction goes a long way toward establishing this foundation. There is ample information in all parts of the book to educate, provide insight, and even entertain, while addressing a myriad of topics. The *Handbook* makes sense of and catalogues many remarkably complex themes and specific concepts in a clear, useful manner. ■

TIMOTHY A. NOLAN is an eighth grade Social Studies teacher and the Co-Building Department Leader for Social Studies at R. J. Grey Junior High School in Acton, Massachusetts. Nolan teaches a course called World Cultures, which features in-depth units on China, Japan, Russia, and the Middle East. He has participated in summer study tours to Japan (2003) and China (2004) through NCTA, the Five College Center for East Asian Studies, and the Freeman Foundation.

UPCOMING
Education About Asia
SPECIAL SECTIONS

WINTER 2004

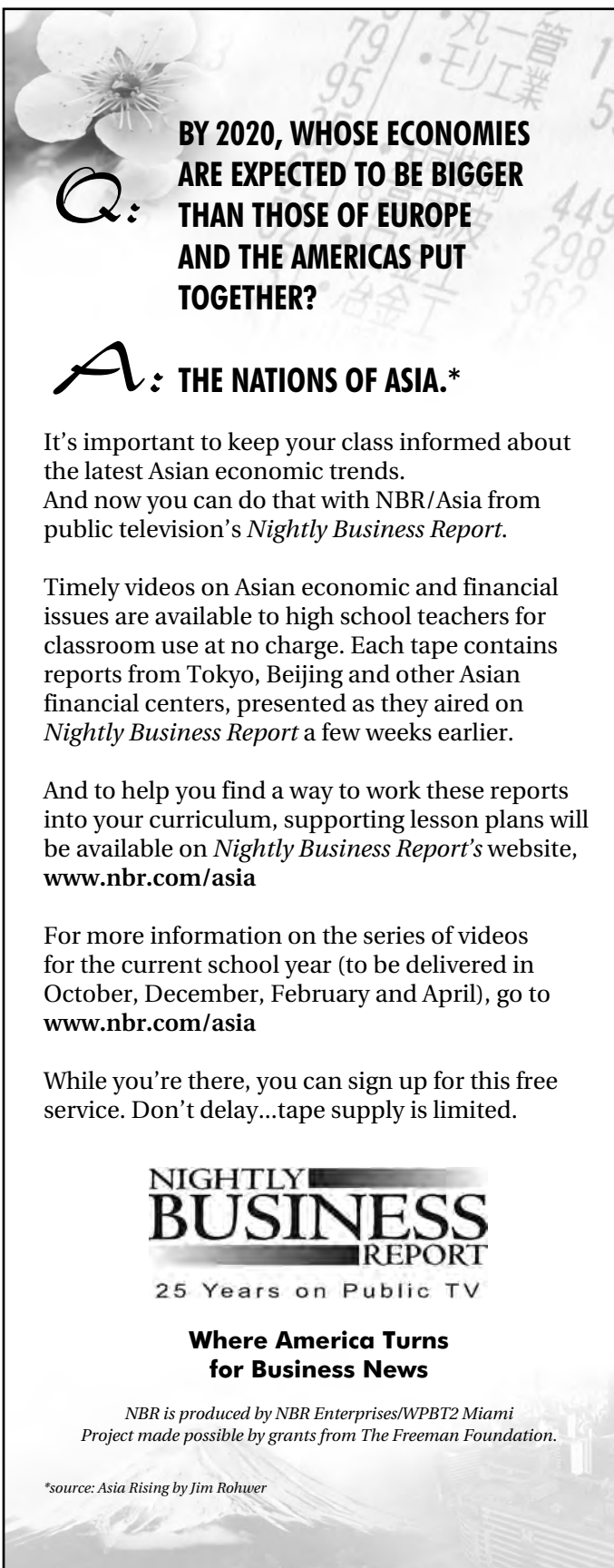
Teaching about Asia through Rice

SPRING 2005

Teaching about Islam in Asia

FALL 2005

Teaching about Twentieth-Century Asia



Q: BY 2020, WHOSE ECONOMIES ARE EXPECTED TO BE BIGGER THAN THOSE OF EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS PUT TOGETHER?

A: THE NATIONS OF ASIA.*

It's important to keep your class informed about the latest Asian economic trends. And now you can do that with NBR/Asia from public television's *Nightly Business Report*.

Timely videos on Asian economic and financial issues are available to high school teachers for classroom use at no charge. Each tape contains reports from Tokyo, Beijing and other Asian financial centers, presented as they aired on *Nightly Business Report* a few weeks earlier.

And to help you find a way to work these reports into your curriculum, supporting lesson plans will be available on *Nightly Business Report's* website, www.nbr.com/asia

For more information on the series of videos for the current school year (to be delivered in October, December, February and April), go to www.nbr.com/asia

While you're there, you can sign up for this free service. Don't delay...tape supply is limited.

NIGHTLY BUSINESS REPORT
25 Years on Public TV

Where America Turns for Business News

*NBR is produced by NBR Enterprises/WPBT2 Miami
Project made possible by grants from The Freeman Foundation.*

*source: Asia Rising by Jim Rohwer