

#### VIII. Concluding observations

This study cannot be more than just a small step towards the appreciation of an apparently systematic order of emotional processes, undergone by a musician/singer. In the *shamisen kumiuta* it is possible that a listener is meant to participate in these processes, the *koto kumiuta*, however, seem more like a monologue.

As far as I am aware research has so far not even as much as hinted at principles that might be responsible for the specific order of emotional steps within a *kumiuta*. A considerable amount of speculation is therefore involved if I here venture to touch upon this subject. As a point of departure, I maintain that it is essential to reflect upon the three great systems of thought that have decisively influenced East Asian culture: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

Although, as I have shown, the *kumiuta* have their roots in pre-Tokugawa Japan, the rigid system of "songs for certificates" – or "certificates for songs" – that characterizes all aspects of the *kumiuta* as we know them today evolved at a time where society was expected to follow (Neo-)Confucian principles. This is especially true for members of the *samurai* class, and thus presumably for that element of society in which the *koto kumiuta* tradition was rooted. It is open to debate, on the other hand, how far the *shamisen kumiuta* are influenced by Confucian concepts. Possibly an influence of such concepts is to be seen at least in the careful organization of a once loosely structured repertoire. Also the type of "world" depicted in the *shamisen kumiuta* is both conspicuously uniform in itself as well as very distinct from that in the *koto kumiuta*, a fact that may be a reflection of the strict division of social classes introduced during the first century of Tokugawa rule.

Taoism as an individual body of concepts reflected in the *kumiuta* repertoire is difficult to grasp. Probably specific Taoist elements – to be discussed presently – must be seen as part of the Confucian tradition. This is not the place to comment in detail on the close relationship between Confucianism and Taoism in Japan since ancient times. Suffice it to point out, however, that the idea of Yin and Yang and of a rigid

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cosmological order that transcends the will and the wishes of man is common to both. In Confucianism, realization of this absolute order leads to the realization that social order is necessary, and it is reasonable to assume that in *kumiuta* the mention of natural order (for instance the four seasons, or the moon with its strict patterns of change that occur in complete independence of anything that happens in the life of an individual) is intended as a hint at the importance of social order and the adaptation of the self to the requirements of overall harmony.

Buddhism, finally, may be almost imperceptible in the *koto kumiuta*, but it is reflected in the *shamisen kumiuta*, which draw much of their material from the world of the popular amalgam of (foreign) Buddhist and indigenous deities, images, and enlightened and/or super-natural beings capable of magic, guidance and redemption from suffering.

How far Zen Buddhism, in particular, forms an element of *kumiuta*, is too complex a question to deal with here. Differing considerably from those Buddhist creeds that believe in external help along a path to paradise, and sharing characteristic Confucian and Taoist ideas with their emphasis on self-cultivation along a path towards unification with the unfathomable harmony of the universe, Zen Buddhism possibly exerts an influence on *koto kumiuta*, although this seems difficult to prove.

Concerning Buddhism in general, one further aspect should be mentioned. Being a musical art form, *kumiuta* naturally possess a sensual appeal. This is particularly true in those parts of a piece where the instrument performs an interlude between two passages of the text. In the face of this sensual element the fact cannot be ignored that an important component of Buddhism as it spread from India throughout East Asia was meditation, and with it undoubtedly also techniques for stimulating inner vitality through sensual means. One of these stimuli was sound, others included colour and odour. Though it may seem far-fetched, it is difficult to flatly reject the possibility that meditation by means of sound, colour and odour (the latter

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referred to by the song text) forms an essential part of a musical art from such as *kumiuta*, which, moreover, certainly do not aim at entertaining a large audience.

Common to all *kumiuta* is a force that drives the singer towards an ideal state, be it peace, harmony, happiness, fulfilment, or the popular Taoist idea of longevity and eternal youthfulness. In some songs fulfilment is of a clearly erotic nature, in others there is often an erotic atmosphere but not what we generally would call erotic fulfilment. A number of songs appear to be quite straightforward invitations to a night of fun (probably against payment), while others seem to place their emphasis merely upon the universal human wish to fulfil what the law of Yin and Yang demands. Moreover, both *shamisen* and *koto kumiuta* as a rule betray a female perspective, though the topic "problems of human existence" may override the specific aspect of existence as male/female.

What exactly are we to understand by the concept of harmony, happiness and fulfilment that the *kumiuta* musician is driven to realize in the course of a song? The point of departure is probably realization that the universe (and with it society and thus also a person's individual situation) always is at it is. This demands that a human being not only adapt to its laws but also eliminate all forces within him- or herself that hinder natural and peaceful adaptation. Typically, such forces are grudge, jealousy, anger, frustration, hope or sadness. In Buddhist terminology, a human being must "strive to get out of the six worlds of earthly existence" (see commentary to the *kumiuta Tori-gumi*). In a Confucian and/or Taoist perspective a human being must strive not to upset the fabric of universal order through individual emotion, or, perhaps, to "understand cherry blossom and autumn foliage but strive for the eternal green of the pine", or to "understand the colours of growth and heat (red and green) but strive for white".

In this sense the singing of a song brings a human being in contact with, or towards the realization of, a superior world, be it Buddhist, Confucian or Taoist. One question remains, however: How is one to continue being human, subject to the laws of Yin and Yang, and yet live in a superior world? What is a human being of flesh and blood to do in the face of absolute

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truth (often symbolized by the moon), which contains both natural and social laws beyond individual grasp?

Given just the *kumiuta* texts and the lines along which they are generally interpreted, it is very difficult to tell whether a *kumiuta* answers this question or not. It would seem strange, though, if it did not. The sheer force of a *kumiuta*'s thrust forward towards a goal can hardly stop short of resolving such an important problem. Surface analysis of the words of an individual song, however, does little to clearly characterize the kind of goal to be reached. If anything, the ending of most songs appears somewhat puzzling, to say the least.

It is certainly conceivable that a woman, in order to attain Buddhahood, be forced to perform good deeds, possibly by using her Yin quality to help satisfy a corresponding Yang unit. A good deed of this kind would have nothing to do with the emotion of the particular persons involved but be a simple fulfilment of the laws of the universe. As for individual emotion, this would be the very factor preventing salvation of the woman, as it would stand in the way of universal good deeds. It does not seem unlikely that the world of the dancing girl and entertainer so strongly reflected in the *shamisen kumiuta* is characterized precisely by reasoning of this kind. After all, we must not forget that social order and harmony quite particularly in the Tokuwaga period saw every stratum in society confined to a specific field of activity.

If we take the carriers of the Yang quality to be compelled to act according to the laws of the universe, then it becomes clear that the carriers of the Yin quality have the highly important duty of channelling and soothing the force of Yang. In other words, Yin's good deeds are those of restoring balance as well as preventing Yang from exhausting itself.

Self-control in order to perform one's duty in the framework of universal order and harmony is a requirement obviously not limited to dancing girls and entertainers. It applies to all human beings and is a matter of realizing who one is: a servant, a princess, a wife, a concubine, and, of course, a Yin or a Yang unit (i.e. a woman or a man). Thus one's specific "essence" may be made servicable to society and contribute to its equilibrium.

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Whereas being a male implies a person's cultivation of his Yang qualities and performance of duties towards his superior, being a female implies cultivation of a person's Yin qualities and performance of duties towards a male. In other words, also an educated wife and/or woman of the *samurai* class – presumably the main group of persons trained in *koto kumiuta* – had the task of educating and thus also channelling the Yang forces. At the same time, all emotions that might stand in the way of performing this duty had to be neutralized.

In view of the significance of a woman's task of controlling the Yang forces (and of maintaining the equilibrium of society), it does not seem unreasonable to assume that a woman was instructed in techniques to subdue her individual emotions, and possibly taught corresponding techniques to her partner to enable him to function according to his duties. It is here that the important (Taoist) concept of longevity comes in, a state that can only be gained by balancing Yin and Yang on the one hand, and by retaining the essence of Yang and preserving its vital qualities on the other. If this is correctly done, it was believed that the Way of (Common) Man could be overcome and a state of freedom reached in which unification meant exchange of nothing but pure, vital energy. This, I have a strong suspicion, is what is being hinted at in an elegant and – for us – roundabout way as the conclusion of those *kumiuta* that do not contain any other specific message.

Many questions relating both to the meaning and the function of *kumiuta* remain unsolved. In my opinion, however, it is important to see the *kumiuta* as a body of songs that took shape at the same time as the new order of Tokugawa–Japan did. Thus it seems natural that they reflect the will to create an orderly repertoire of music consisting of an orderly succession of images. *kumiuta* are almost certainly an effort to regulate society by regulation of the emotions of its individual elements.

The cultural heritage available to Tokugawa–Japan in its effort to tackle the problem of regulating emotion included Buddhism (Tantric Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Amidist Buddhism, to mention three major types), Confucianism, and Taoism. Common to all these is the striving for a world in which the actual, present

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physical existence is of subordinate importance. Rather, it is necessary to grasp, then regulate and order the forces that flow through a person of flesh and blood as a result of his or her being part of a universal harmony. Once understood and ordered, these forces must be led in a direction where they not only lose their destructive potential, but can be used to help the individual enjoy a long, healthy, happy and prosperous life as a respected member of a Confucian society.

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