

Music of the Lion Dance in Japanese Tradition*

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The lion dance is one of the most popular momentum of *kagura* ceremonies and folk feasts, the *matsuris*, which can be performed inside the shrines just as much as on nearby stages or in the area in front of the shrines. The word *shishi* itself means “lion”, people do not recall the real animal, but rather the image of the mythical creature. Lions have never lived in Japan, and they used to exist only in the southern regions of China. Besides the zoomorphic mythical creatures of the dragon and the phoenix, it was the tiger that first became the subject of cultic respect in China: it was worshipped as the king of the animals and the enemy of demons. According to the records of the Ceremonies (*Li-ch'i*), the classical book of Confucianists, separate offering was given to the honour of the tiger during the autumn feasts. The cult of the lion spread in China quite late along with Buddhism and it must have reached Korea and Japan by the transmission of Buddhist mythology.

It was not only religion that had an intermediary role in that, but the practice of court music. Since the Japanese imperial court adopted the praxis of the Chinese Tang-court to its own environment, it also emulated the moments that are especially important now as the proofs of the lion cult. The *Tang-ch'i* chronicle, for example describes a musical dance scene originating from Kutsha:

a zither, a harp, a lute, a flute, a mouth organ, several drums and four dancers participate. This is called the dance of the five lions. The lions appear in five different colours and they are taller than one *jo* [approximately three metres]. Twelve men lead one lion...¹

* Excerpt from the book *Tánc a mennyei barlang előtt. Zene és mítosz a japán rituális hagyományban (A kagura)* [Dance In Front of the Heavenly Cave: Music and Myth in the Japanese Ritual Tradition (The Kagura)], Budapest: Kávé, 1998. English publication in preparation.

¹ Eta Harich-Schneider: *A History of Japanese Music*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973. p. 166.

An almost literally identical attest is laid down in the great Chinese study on musical theory of the period, the *Yüeh-fu tsa-lu* as well connected to the name of Tuan An-ch'ieh.²

There are also written documents about the appearance of the lion dance in Japan. The *Shinzei kogaku-zu*, a valuable series of scroll pictures survived from the 12th century that contains a lot of information on the genres of Japanese court music, dance and acting, the practice of *gagaku*, *bugaku* and *gigaku*. One of the pictures is called *shishi mai*, that is “lion dance” and it depicts a procession: one of the dancers leads a huge lion represented by two men, on a rope and there are musicians behind them. A member of the puissant Fujiwara family copied the scroll picture and added the following comment to the picture citing Chinese sources:

According to Bunken-tsu-ko³ this dance forms part of [a *bugaku* play called] *Taiheiraku* and is also referred to as *Goho no shishi mai*, that is the dance of the five lions. A hundred and forty people sing the melody of *Taiheiraku* during the performance of this dance. Lions live in Seinan [South-west China] and in Tenjiku [India].

Another picture of the same Japanese scroll indicates transmission through Korea; it depicts a dancer in the fur of a fierce looking animal and since the inscription *shiragi koma* means “silla dog”, the dance scene unequivocally refers to the Silla kingdom in South-east Korea (7–10th century).⁴

Researching the material documents of the *bugaku* tradition, Nishikawa Kyotaro examined the origin and destiny of masks. He also touches upon the history of *shishi mai* in his work:

Shishimai, based on a Gyôdô (temple procession) piece and even today an extremely popular folk performance, has its counterparts in almost every Asian country, such as the Chinese lion dance and the Balinese *barong* dance. Usually two or three people dress in a lion's costume, one holding the large lion mask and manipulating its mouth, the others acting as the hind legs and manoeuvring the body. At times the lion is accompanied by boy attendants or an old man. The *gigaku* version of the lion dance had two forms: the *Shishi* and the *Shishiko* (Lion Cub). ...The exact appearance of the Bugaku Shishi mask is unknown. The Shôsô-in treasury at Tôdai-ji contains a Nara-period Gigaku mask, and the Hôryu-ji a late Heian mask used in a Gyôdô performed on the anniversary of the death of Shôtoku Taishi. There are many Shishi masks made after the Kamakura

² Martin Gimm: *Das Yüeh-fu tsa-lu des Tuan An Chieh*. Studien zur Geschichte von Musik, Schauspiel und Tanz in der T'ang-Dynastie. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966.

³ In Chinese: Wen-hsien-t'ung-kao. Harich-Schneider Op. cit. p. 166.

⁴ The portrayal of the lion and the dog is often blurred in Chinese arts as well.

period, but most are used in Gyôdô processions, while the rest are worn in what has become a separate, independent *shishi* dance.⁵

The lion dance also appears in the ancient tradition of the *nô* theatre. Although, a similar theme occurs in the repertoire of Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1444), the creator of the genre, the classical play that had the lion dance as its central theme is connected to the name of Jurô Motomasa (1395–1459) and its title is “Stone bridge” (*Shakkyô*). It has the following simple plot: Ôe no Sadamoto, a historical figure goes on a pilgrimage to China as a Buddhist monk. Journeying in Ching Liang mountain he arrives at a strange stone bridge, but before he could cross a wood-cutter warns him: he incurs extraordinary danger. Manjusri bodhisattva lives on the other side of the bridge, surrounded by a forest of flowers and music. The pilgrim yields to reason and has a great experience: a lion appears and performs a wondrous dance.⁶

Spectators used to European stages may not feel the actual dramatic force and ambivalence of this anagnorisis, but it tells a lot to the audience of the *nô* theatre. For what appears as danger from this side of the bridge – the risk of life, for example – is the happiness of the “western paradise” in the interpretation of the yôdô Buddhist sect. The lion, therefore, is nothing else but the representative or even incarnation of the deity – bodhisattva Manjusri in this case. Japanese Buddhism has a separate word for incarnation: *gongen*.⁷

The popularity of the lion dance is shown by that the composition written for the *nô* theatre has several *kabuki* versions as well. Not less than ten plays were staged between 1737 and 1907 on the basis of *Shakkyô*’s material and further six were derived from the popular lion dance productions of the folk feasts called *matsuri*.⁸ With all that we have arrived at the *shishi kagura*, the fourth type of the Honda classification of the *kagura*.

Since the genre of the *kagura* was par excellence introduced as a Shinto genre, the question automatically arises: is it not repugnant to the Buddhist mythology of the lion? There are several animal figures in autochthon Japanese mythology: existing animals as *kitsune* (fox), *tanuki* (badger) just as well as imaginary creatures (the crocodile-like *wani*, the long-nosed *tengu*), but not lions. However, just as the figures of dragon and phoenix from China as dynastic symbols could take root in Japan, the lion also found its place at

⁵ Nishikawa Kyôtarô: *Bugaku Masks*. Transl. by M. Bethe. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978. p. 94.

⁶ „Shakkyo, a Bridge between Noh and Kabuki Music – One Story in Two Genres”. In: William P. Malm: *Six Hidden Views of Japanese Music*. Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. pp. 52–88.

⁷ This word will come up on the course of the discussion of the lion dance.

⁸ Malm op. cit. p. 54.

various layers of society, with several functions and in various genres, as we have seen it.

The condition for the admission, or even the flourishing of the lion figure was obviously religious tolerance and syncretism that could maintain Buddhism (with its variety of sects) and the Shinto (with its folk roots and branches). The *kagura* is only a par excellence Shinto ceremony as far as we regard its origin and close link to the mythical world of the *Kojiki*. If we also consider that on the course of centuries, the symbiosis of the Shinto and Buddhism developed its dual practice and its ideology, the theory of *honji-suijaku*, then we should regard Buddhist elements in the *kagura* natural.

It is a generally accepted view that the *shugendô* played an important part in the development of the folk varieties of the *kagura*. This religious movement branched from the Tendai and Shingon sects of Buddhism combining the elements of Chinese Tao, esoteric Buddhism and Japanese folk religion. Its followers, the so-called *yamabushis* are monks on perpetual pilgrimage who collect magical power and force to reach their ultimate goal: enlightenment. The main subjects of their religious devotion are mountains, that is also why they are called “prostrate to the mountain” (*yama* = mountain, *bushi* = someone who prostrates before sy/sg): this momentum, however, has direct link to the mountain admiration of the folk religion (*yama no kami* = the god of the mountain). The *shugendô* as a sect began its decline in the Tokugawa period, although the activity of the *yamabushis* still flourished, because they met with great recognition in the villages with their shamanistic-healing practice and musical performance abilities. Instead of preaching to spread the ideas of the *shugen*, they carried out their educational duties by re-acting the mythical episodes in masks and costumes and by representing the imaginary concepts and creatures of mythology into visible and palpable characters.

The research of Honda Yasuji finally led to the conclusion that the fourth type of the *kagura* he first characterised by the lion figure of the *shishi* is in point of fact intertwines with the *yamabushi* activity, therefore the category can have alternative titles: *shishi* or *yamabushi kagura*.⁹ Both titles, however, should be used and interpreted with considerable allowance, because they do not cover each other, but only grasp characteristic moments of a larger type of *kagura* with relation to other forms. Therefore: the lion dance

⁹ Honda Yasuji: Yamabushi Kagura and Bangaku: Performance in the Japanese Middle Ages and Contemporary Folk Performance, *Education Theatre Journal*, 1974.

is the central element in the *shishi kagura*, but other dances and complete play episodes can also be performed as well, while the emphasis in the *yama-bushi kagura* is on certain dances and play episodes, but the lion dance can also be included with them.

Before turning to the characteristics and musical structure of the folk, or we could say *kagura* version of the lion dance, it is necessary to take a look at the traditions that were the pristine sources of the Japanese version and that developed parallel to it: namely the appearance of the folk versions of the lion dance in China and Korea.

Unfortunately, we know very little about the survival of the Chinese tradition, therefore it is especially important that we have found valuable data in the book of Tun Li-ch'en, an author around the turn of the century titled *Yen-ching Sui-shih-chi*, published in 1900. The author gives a vivid description of the Pekinese feasts and customs and also relates that the members of the *Yü Lan* company put on lion costumes and perform acrobatic dances on the market-places in front of the shrines on the day of the *Chung Yüan* feast.¹⁰

The lion dance also often appears in the Korean masked dance plays. One of them is the famous Pukchong lion dance originating from a northern region of Korea. This lion dance, however, is not only a part of the plot in the folk play, but it is its central scene. Since the lion dance roots in shamanistic traditions regarding its origins, the political dictatorship in North Korea prosecuted it with all the other types of shamanism, so the northern shamans and female shamans together with many of those who preserve the tradition of the Pukchong lion dance fled south.¹¹

The Pukchong lion dance stages the lions in pairs, namely a male and a female, who express their “marital” relationship in a very affectionate and humorous manner. The most important momentum of the plot, which is not too dense in respect of action, is when the lioness demands food, the servant gives her a rabbit she immediately devours at one mouthful.¹² After that, however, she starts staggering then flattens out dead on the ground. The

¹⁰ *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking, as recorded in the Yen-ching Sui-shih-chi* by Tun Li-Ch'en. Translated and annotated by Derk Bodde. Hong Kong, 1965. 62, 115. I have no information on the current researches – or contingent results – of the topic.

¹¹ I took photos and made recordings on my grand tour in South Korea at a performance of the Pukchong lion dance on the Nori Madang open-air stage in Seoul.

¹² Lions are said to have received a child in such cases, but this practice was relinquished about fifty years ago and the child is substituted by a hare. See Kim Ch'ong-hung: Mask Dance. In: *Survey of Korean Arts: Folk Arts*. Seoul: National Academy of Arts, 1974. p. 353.

other characters of the dance-play immediately enter to cure the sick lion. They first call a Buddhist nun, but her healing-reviving ceremony proves unsuccessful. Then comes a Chinese miracle-doctor's attempt, which finally brings success: the lioness slowly regains consciousness, gets to her feet and to the great pleasure of her mate – and of course, to the hilarity of the audience – she starts dancing again.¹³

The two lions come to life by the expertly co-ordinated movement of two dancers in each one. Their huge maw does not resemble those of real lions (and it is also different from the Japanese mask) and their fur is represented by a folkweave of long threads. The weave is of threads of five different colours, but one can discern it only at short range, because their general effect is by all means brown from some distance. We should note that the use of five colours – like in traditional arts in general – has symbolic meaning and is indirectly related to Confucian numerology.¹⁴ The Pukchong lion – similarly to its popular Japanese counterpart – is actually not a frightening beast, but a kind and funny phenomenon, whose hulking gambolling, snapping jaws and pretended wildness is highly appreciated by the audience. The melodies are played by *t'ungso*, a large notched bamboo vertical flute, with drum and gong accompaniment (*Example 1*).

According to experts of Korean folklore, the Pukchong lion dance is closely related to certain exorcising ceremonies of shamans. The performances are held on New Year's Day of the lunar calendar, generally on the main square of the village. Prior to that the performers of the dance go from door to door and perform their exorcist activities for a small return (rice or cash): they go to the courtyard and the kitchen and guarantee peace and prosperity for the household while performing a wild dance and snapping their teeth. If the master of the house requires they raise the spirits of the ancestors.¹⁵

Japanese life and culture is almost completely interlaced and enfolded in the various forms of the lion dance – from “exorcists” going from door to door like in Korea through the stirring scenes of folk feasts and the *shishi*

¹³ In another version of the performance the lioness falls because of labour-pains and a whelp is born in the scene as the result of the cure.

¹⁴ The reference to the “five coloured lion” in the recently quoted sources from the T'ang period may have meant this and not five lions of different colours.

¹⁵ YI Du-hyon: Mask-Dance Drama. In: *Survey of Korean Arts: Folk Arts*. Seoul: National Academy of Arts, 1974. 162–163. Korean scholars have published several excellent studies also available in English on the genre of masked dance plays. The literature of musicology, however, treats this genre rather inimical. Keith Pratt, for example reviews the history and plot of the lion dance only very sketchily. (*Korean Music: Its History and Its Performance*. Seoul: Yung Eum Sa–London: Faber, 1987. p. 55.)

a) $\text{♩} = 48$ KK 2



b) $\text{♩} = 60$ → $\text{♩} = 84$ KK 2



Example 1

kagura performed in the shrines to the polished *nô* performances. This tradition is so vast and manifold that we can present and analyse only a fraction of it. We do not follow the way of Honda by separating the functional elements of the *kagura*, but our own the main guiding aspect of which is the location of the “performance”. That is we look for the lion dance first inside the shrine or its immediate vicinity.

First, we quote the words of A. W. Sadler, a very competent witness who discovered an astonishingly authentic performance of the “shrine-*kagura*” during the thorough examination of the Tokyo *kagura* in 1970.

... For my final prototype, which we might call a phenomenological prototype, we must examine a type of *kagura* that is distinctly not a folk drama, and not done out-of-doors, but within the confines of the *haiden* of the shrine building itself: a sort of private, command performance for the *kami* himself alone. It is known by various names in Tokyo, and takes very different forms in different shrines (each has its own traditions); but it seems most commonly to be known as *dai-dai kagura*. Sometimes it is not too different from the *sato kagura* done in the *kaguraden*, except that it is simpler, more polished, and lacking in the *modoki* roles. But the performance I have particularly in mind is the one that is

done inside the *haiden* of the little shrine next to the huge Kannon temple in Asakusa, in mid-May, during the great Sanja-sama Matsuri. There, in the darkness of the sacred hall, two huge lions cavort: two lion masks and costumes, one representing the masculine principle, the other the feminine, each occupied by two skill dancers. It is a very formal dance, as the lions crouch, the rise and turn and face in the four directions, and crouch and rise again. Watching them, standing out in the blazing sun and peering in at them, with the crowd pushing ever closer to catch a glimpse, one is present at the creation of the world; and I thought to myself: Do you suppose there was at once a time when dances like this were done “secretely”, inside the *haiden*, and people, peeping in from outside, thought they were actually seeing the gods themselves solemnly cavorting on the *tatami*? The movements of those lions is something unearthly, and supra-human. I mean: the line between representation and holy presence is blurred... It is as the head priest of one shrine told me: “You mustn’t worry too much about the origins and locales of the different schools of *kagura*. You must try to get the spirit of the dance. *Kagura* is one of the ways of giving pleasure to the *kami* at *o-matsuri* time; so origins do not matter, only the spirit. The spirit is essential. The atmosphere of the festival. You’ve got to feel it.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, Sadler only talks about the spectacle and does not mention anything about the sound experience, although sound recordings have already appeared since 1962 on the musical practice of the most important shrines of Tokyo, like the *kanda myôyin*, the *nezu gongen*, the *shinagawa jinja* and the *suitengu jinja*, and these recordings give an indeed authentic picture of the repertoire of the so-called *hayashi*, the small musical ensembles of the shrines.¹⁷ The musical performance displays high qualification, good technique and conscious planning. The basic set up of the ensembles: a high pitched cross flute (*kagurabue* or *nôkan*), a bound small drum (*taiko*), a nailed big drum (*ô-daiko*) and a small gong (*kane*). The following musical examples present a characteristic excerpt of the *dai* or *dai-dai kagura* and the connected lion dance, the *shishi mai*¹⁸ (Example 2).

The lion dance performed outside the shrine or in front of an ad hoc shrine does not significantly differ from the one described above. I would like to quote an authentic testimony for the documentation of it, the account of the English authors J. and M. E. Grim about the events of the *hana matsuri* (from the village of Shimoawashiro in Aichi prefecture in January 1982).¹⁹

¹⁶ A. W. Sadler: O-Kagura: Field Notes on the Festival Drama in Modern Tokyo. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 29, 1970. pp. 299–300.

¹⁷ *Edo no sato kagura to matsuri bayashi* [Edo Sato Kagura and Festival Music, ed. by Honda Yasuji] Victor SJ 3004 – 1~3.

¹⁸ *Nihon Min’yo Taikan* [Corpus of Japanese Folk Songs]. Tokyo: Nippon Hoso Kyôkai, 1990.

¹⁹ John & Mary Evelyn Grim: Viewing the Hana Matsuri at Shimoawashiro, Aichi Prefecture. *Asian Folklore Studies* Vol. 41, 1982. p. 176.

a) $\text{♩} = 132$ NMTK Tóhoku 722. Fukusima tart.

fue

b) $\text{♩} = 120$ NMTK Kantó 185. Szaitama tart.

fue

c) $\text{♩} = 108$ NMTK Kantó 233. Csiba tart.

fue

Example 2

The final dance in the *maidō* area [ad hoc stage] was the *shishi*, or lion's dance, which is traditionally associated with purification. First a young person wearing a clown *Okame* mask and holding *sakaki* in his left hand came to the *maidō* where he greeted the *shishi*. The *shishi* was played by two people, one person manipulating the mask and the other filling out the cloth body. The *shishi* held a rice straw bundle (*yutabusa*) in its mouth, and, after circulating around the *kama* [cauldron], it placed this in the remaining waters of the cauldron. Then the *shishi* performed a dance of purification by shaking the wet straw bundle about the *maidō*. This alternately humorous and serious masked figure ended the public dances.

The English authors do not provide any information on music apart from some vague references, however the remarkable *Folk Performing Arts of Japan* record series provides a rich collection of the music of two signifi-

cant feasts – the *hana masuri* of Ashikome and the *fuyu matsuri* of Sakabe – of the same region (Aichi, Nagano).²⁰

I encountered the *dai-dai kagura* experience personally in a village of the Shimokita peninsula, Aomori prefecture on the northern part of the island of Honshu. It is not a remote village, but the repository of the *kagura* traditions of the Higashidôrimura region, a religious and cultural centre known throughout the country. The semi-professional musicians, singers and dancers of the area methodically cultivate various branches of *minzoku geinô*, i.e. the performing arts. The *dai kagura* or *hira jishi kagura* connected to the operation of the *Mena jinja* plays a prominent part in them.²¹ The character of the lion is so much in the focus of every ceremony or “performance” carried out here that the mask is kept on the altar of the shrine in a cabinet, just like the Torah scroll in the Ark of the Covenant in the Jewish synagogue. The *shishi* mask therefore is a special sanctity, the dwelling of deity or – as it is officially called here – *kumano gongen*, that is the incarnation or “manifestation” of the Buddhist deity of Kumano. We have mentioned that during the ceremony in the *kagura* practice related to the Shinto religion, the *kami*, the divine spirit is present in certain objects – *gohei*, bulrush scroll, sword, sistrum –, but only until the dancers hold them in their hands. This is *torimono*. However, while these objects become the manifestation of the deity only temporarily, the lion mask is a *gongen*, that is a permanent incarnation.

The huge, mostly red lion head bearing no actual resemblance to a real lion is so much in the focus of respect that the body is not taken much care of. As opposed to the Korean “fur” a thin plaid represents the body in Japan with one or two dancers beneath; the colouring of the covering sheet does not imitate the fur of the animal, but contains abstract, mostly round patterns on a plain – brown or green – background. It also happens – especially within the frame of folk acting, when they go from door to door with the *shishi* mask – that they do not even put on the lion head, but hold them in their hands instead and snap its teeth.

The musical ensemble of the *Mena jinja* is composed of the already presented quartet of flute – two drums – gong with occasional additional instruments. An organic part of the respect of the lion mask is that the dancer does not put it on outside in some dressing room, but on the spot of the ceremony. On the beginning of the music three dancers enter and take up their position

²⁰ *Nihon no Minzoku Ongaku*. Tokyo: Victor SJL 2166–2204 [1976] Vol. II – 2.

²¹ “Ordinary or common lion”. The pronunciation of *shishi* changes to *jishi* if preceded by another word.

in the middle in Japanese kneeling sitting positions. Action begins only after a certain prelude is played: the person in the middle puts the lion head with the plaid on, while the other simulates the continuation of the body. The third dancer is the “partner” of the lion all the way dancing opposite, provoking and enticing it.