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"You Can Feel the Other World Is Very Close" Buddhist Cosmologies and Sacred Spaces in Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines some conceptualizations of Japanese cosmologies and sacred spaces within the Buddhist tradition. It first outlines how spaces and landscapes were perceived before the arrival of Buddhism and then explores their subsequent transformation in the medieval period through the use of mandalas, which were used to bridge the gap between the earthly realm and the Other World. This is connection is exemplified through the Womb World represented in mandalas, that can still be symbolically accessed through a sensory experience at multiple temples even today. Such entrances to the Other World are marked not only by symbolic spatial boundaries but also by temporal thresholds, during calendrical rites and liminal times.

These cosmologies continue to exert a lasting influence on contemporary society, as evident in the remnants of geomancy in urban planning and frequent inclusion of Other Worlds in Japanese literature and popular culture. On the basis of fieldwork findings and existing research, the author concludes that the Other World is still present in contemporary Japan, being experienced as proximate to, and intertwined with, everyday life.

Keywords: Japan, religion, cosmology, sacred space, alternative worlds

Introduction: Japan, a Land Both Sacred and Profane

The world often imagines Japan as the enchanted land of ancient temples and shrines tucked away in old forests – likening it to a dreamlike and mysterious Other World. These idealized depictions have only been further reinforced in recent years due to increasing tourism and social media posts. I believe that many visitors, myself included, experience a degree of disillusionment when finally visiting the country, as the reality of modern urban life is rather mundane, marked by economic and societal issues. This made me want to explore how the Japanese themselves perceive the environment they live in and how their religious cosmologies influenced these perceptions. During two months of fieldwork across Japan in the spring of 2025, I encountered the coexistence of multiple, seemingly contradictory worldviews – ideas about reality and the world which took shape during hundreds of years of history, yet still have a subtle, but enduring influence in many aspects of modern life.

Fact is, that the Japanese are nowadays showing less and less interest in actively participating in their religious traditions, as indicated by the decreasing numbers of parishioners at the Buddhist temples (see Nelson, 2012). Perhaps the reason for the unassuming stance of the Japanese regarding their religious culture is due to the fact that

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they are used to things like passing by a wayside Jizō shrine on their way to work or visiting famous temples on holidays. Even though individuals may not consider themselves religious per se, one gets the impression through observing the way people experience the world around them, that they are very much living in close proximity to the Other World, despite having embraced the Western, scientific and rational worldview more than one and a half century ago, and to an even greater degree in the decades following the second world war.

Ancient pilgrimage trails have never stopped being trodden, and both shrines and temples are still enjoying a steady influx of domestic visitors, although the question of whether they are tourists, pilgrims, or both is up for debate. It seems that the old and the new worldviews, apparently different, are not necessarily incompatible for the Japanese.

> Indeed, to many Japanese their country has a split ontological outlook: on the one hand, there is Japan as the concrete place of their everyday lives; on the other, an invisible realm populated by all kinds of presences: ghosts, spirits, ancestors, gods [...] (Rambelli, 2019, 1)

Essentially, the typical Japanese adheres to several ontological systems (Clammer, Clammer, Poirier, & Schwimmer, 2004, 14) that influenced each other greatly while remaining distinct from each other. The Japanese worldview is poly-cosmological in that different models of reality coexist within belief systems, while retaining their boundaries and distinctive logics (Palmer, 2022). Thus, we cannot easily draw clear lines of categorization between different traditions (Reader, 2005, 20).

One method of analysis, which I will also make use of in this study, is the geography of religion, which studies its relationship with the environment through both empirical and symbolic means. Through the agency of communities, religion generates concrete spatial structures and, at the same time, offers a cosmology which appears symbolically in the structure of the space (Matsui, 2013, 191).

Fieldwork material for this paper was gathered during my travels across Japan in spring of 2025, the majority of which comes from the Kansai area (centering around Kyoto, Kobe and Osaka). Collecting the material proved quite difficult, both because of the language barrier and because many people were not used to talking about matters pertaining to religion and their beliefs. That is why I wish to express my gratitude to all interviewees who openly shared their views with me.

In this study, I wish to present the ways the alternative realities in Japan have been conceptualized in the history of the archipelago within the Buddhist tradition, which, upon its arrival in the 6th century, built upon already existing indigenous conceptions of space. Since Japan's cosmologies have always been pluralistic and not mutually exclusive, one can trace a plethora of different conceptualizations of religious space in the land which was sacralized and imbued with a spiritual dimension exceeding the physical landscape – both in the case of specific sacred sites, larger geographic areas and finally, the nation as a whole.

One of the most important tools for this process were mandalas, which made their way from India through China. They were widely adopted and adapted by the ranks of monks of Esoteric Buddhism, although their influence eventually permeated every aspect of society. Their depictions, often referencing actual sites, provided new ways of conceptualizing space and time and proved fruitful in the spiritual practice of clergy and lay people alike. The edge of the mandala, of course, also implies the border of the sacred space, the entry into the Other World, which can be accessed, or barred through passageways such as gates and bridges, serving as both a symbolic and literal point of departure from the secular world.

A powerful metaphor, which lies at the heart of the mandala, is the womb. Even today, passages through the womb, resulting in symbolic rebirth, can still be experienced in specific temples, for example in Zenkō-ji, where one can wander through their subterranean passages in total darkness before making the ascent back towards daylight.

Traditional cosmologies and conceptualizations have had a lasting influence on Japanese culture, from popular culture and literature to the way houses and cities continue to be organized to harmonize space and avoid negative influences according to the laws of geomancy. The examples from this paper will attempt to show the Other World's historical and continuous entanglement with the quotidian reality in Japan.

Pre-Buddhist Cosmologies and the Structuring of Sacred Space in Japan

Reconstructing the worldviews of the Japanese before the arrival of Buddhism proves difficult, partly due to a lack of written records (Palmer, 1994, 480). However, we can be sure that they took shape in interaction with the physical landscape, through agricultural practices and in relationship with nature, since mediating human-nature relations has always been a key component within Japanese religions (Rots, 2024, 187).

The earliest locations considered as "expressions of the sacred realm in the earthly world" (Grotenhuis 1998:151) were places of unusual physical phenomena, such as exceptionally large trees, strangely-shaped rocks (Nute, 1999, 2) or other similar extraordinary geographic features which were revered as abodes of the spirits called *kami*, whose numinous realm was, although removed from the earthly world, often revealed through such forms. It was only later that permanent structures were established at these places of worship (Matsui, 2013, 18), acquiring their present form of *jinj*a – Shinto Shrines, which are today such a ubiquitous part of Japan's topography, that their presence is "taken for granted by Japanese people, including Japanese geographers" (Palmer, 1994, 485).

> Every Japanese neighborhood has its own local Shinto shrine, and many a Japanese street corner (or rooftop in bustling, urban areas) is home to a small, tutelary shrine to the local kami, or ancestral spirits. (Williams, 2000, 34)

Shrine buildings, however, only started to appear after the arrival of Buddhism in the 6th century. As a monk at Gakuen-ji temple in Izumo put it: "Back then it was just nature, and after Buddhism arrived came the buildings – Shinto copied the temple style" (interview with a Gakuen-ji monk, 7.5.2025). Both religions adopted each other's elements, however (Umehara, 1991, 184). Buddhism especially diverged from its original form when it syncretized with indigenous Japanese cosmologies of the Spirit World (MacFarlane, 2010, 198). With its introduction, the Japanese were given a far more complex cosmos to make sense of (Blacker, 2004, 61). The proposition that Buddhahood could be realized in this body, in this life, and in this world (Grapard, 1982, 202) meant that sacred space, previously limited to sites of *kami* worship, had become all-encompassing.

Generally speaking, the cyclical cosmology of medieval Japan encompassed two main dimensions of existence: the "Other World" of *kami* (and Buddhas), and this world, the world of the living (Williams, 2000, 42). These two dimensions were not mutually exclusive and were considered to be connected. Within the human world, the existence of sites and areas of special religious significance began to be recognized. According to Allan Grapard, a historian of Japanese religions, we can distinguish three coexisting categories of sacred space during the medieval period (Grapard, 1982, 196):

1. Sacred site: a clearly delimited residence of divinities worshipped in Shinto rituals

2. Sacred area: a larger geographic area, covered by a Buddhist pilgrim and depicted using mandalas
3. Sacred nation: Japan as a sacred land, supported by Buddhist cosmology

Buddhist cosmology was also instrumental in shaping Japanese cartographic traditions. In the medieval era maps "functioned as a window through which to project a worldview strongly influenced by religious doctrine, and also a visual guide to see how these ideas, in turn, influenced self-understanding and self-representation" (Kim, 2024, 205). The place of Japan within the Buddhist World was a central topic in both cartographic and Buddhist discourses as early as the 8th century, with Japan taking on both a marginal and central position, simultaneously a "peripheral country as small as a millet grain" and a "great kingdom within the Buddhist world" (Moerman, 2016, 88). One example of the latter was the connection which the Tendai intellectuals made between Mount Hiei and Lake Biwa, on one hand and Mount Sumeru and the Cosmic Ocean of Indian mythology, on the other hand. Claims like these promoted Japan from a remote island chain on the edge of the map to the center of the cosmic mandala – in fact, the concept of Japan as a sacred space played an important role at times when the nation faced the outside world (Grapard, 1982, 217), for example during the 14th century Mongol invasion (Šmitek, 2016, 267).

Ultimately, Buddhist maps were not only a cartographical matter, but also epistemological models. Hōtan[2], a Buddhist monk and cartographer from the 17th century, argued that human vision and Buddhist wisdom are two qualitatively different views of the world, stating that "the wisdom eye of the sage is far more powerful than the human eye and sees the boundless ten-thousand-fold world just like a fruit held in one's hand" (Moerman, 2016, 90).

Topography of the Mandala and Religious Cartography

In this context Buddhist mandalas became an important tool and concept for combining both earthly and otherworldly topographies. We can define mandalas as "representations of sanctified realms where identification between the human and the sacred occurs" (Grotenhuis, 1998, 1), although in Japan, from the 11th century onward, the term was also being used for other religious paintings such as depictions of paradise lands, abodes of Buddhist deities and Shinto shrine complexes. They were simultaneously aesthetic objects and visual representations of sacred space while also serving a ritual purpose in religious practices.

Mandalas were most widely used in Esoteric Buddhist circles, within the schools of Tendai and Shingon. Each school established its respective monastic and symbolic center on a sacred mountain – Mt. Hiei above Kyoto for Tendai and Mt. Koya in the southern part of the Kansai region for Shingon. According to the doctrine of the latter, visual representation is not merely allegorical; rather, the painting or the statue of a deity is the deity itself, thus the mandala is also the cosmos itself (Yamasaki, 1988, 70; Šmitek, 2016, 223). It is this identification of the mandala with our material world that enabled the landscape to be sacralized through the process called mandalization, "an ultimate exercise in magical manipulation" (Grapard, 1982, 207), aimed at making all Japan a sacred site.

Mandalas were projected over geographical areas, with parts of the mandala corresponding to geographic units, which then became sacred spaces of practice for the realization of Buddhahood. One of the first examples of geographic mandalization on a larger scale is

[2] Zuda Rokashi Hōtan (1654-1728) was a prominent Buddhist scholar-priest who 1709 drew the first Buddhist world map called "Map of the Myriad Countries of Jambudvīpa"

the 1180 text, *Shozan engi* ("Origins of Various Mountains"), which likened the Yoshino-Omine and Kumano mountain ranges to the Diamond World and Womb World Mandalas (Grotenhuis, 1998, 175). Similarly, the Tateyama mountain range, depicted in the Tateyama Mandala, was analogous to the Buddhist hell realms, which could be traversed during one's lifetime as a means of ritual purification, thereby avoiding such a journey after death (Šmitek 2016, 259). The physical and spiritual ascent of the pilgrim were seen as simultaneous, as mountains functioned not only as sacred spaces but also as pathways toward enlightenment.

Japanese cartography was not separate from Buddhist cosmographical iconography until the 17th century, with the first influences from European sciences. According to Japanese medieval depictions, the archipelago had the shape of a double mandala of the material and the spiritual world (Šmitek, 2016, 367). Pilgrims and travelers had to rely on such abstract depictions of space when making their journeys. Sometimes mandalas were painted on cheaper paper instead of the usual silk wall tapestries, to be carried on person, and were used both for navigation, didactic purposes, and as an object of worship. They were called *sankei*, pilgrim mandalas, and were often distributed by temples and shrines as a way of collecting donations (Šmitek, 2016, 226). Accomplishing a pilgrimage meant tracing and perceiving a mandala in the traversed space, as seen in one of the first published pilgrim maps of the famous Shikoku pilgrimage, which became widely popular in the 17th century. The map depicts the four prefectures of the circumambulated island as corresponding to the four quadrants of the mandala, while each group of temples represents one of the eight petals of a lotus flower (Šmitek, 2016, 281).

From the 16th century onwards, replicas of sacred spaces akin to miniature pilgrim trails started appearing, enabling believers to accomplish famous pilgrimages, which were often a physical and financial burden (Šmitek, 2016, 280). Some of them can still be visited today, such as the miniature Shikoku pilgrimage in one of the temple halls of Daishō-in on Miyajima. A path leads you around the temple hall, and each of the 88 temples is represented by a deity. Visitors pay homage to each one, as they would at every temple on the trail. This phenomenon shows us how sacred space and landscape can be copied, scaled down, and transported to a new place.

In 835 when Shingon Buddhism was made the official state religion, the emperor started partaking in mandala worship and his palace was seen as a model of the heavenly abode of Buddha Vairocana (Šmitek, 2016, 348). The headquarters of the Shingon school lies south of Osaka, on Mount Kōya, which is even today one of the most famous sacred places and pilgrimage destinations in Japan, perceived as a physical manifestation of a mandala.

> Mandala is the world itself where we live. But we cannot see the Buddha's field in the mandala. Kōya-san [Mount Kōya] is a mandala surrounded by the petals of a lotus flower. Because there are eight mountain tops around this area. So this is the kind of lotus flower, itself, this area. Actually, there is a map of this town represented by the lotus flower. (interview with a Shingon monk, 25.4.2025)

The center of the mandala on the mountain is in the 49 meter tall pagoda, Konpon Daito, which was finished shortly after the death of the founder of the Shingon school on Mount Koya, Kūkai, in 835 (Šmitek, 2016, 443). Its interior is modelled after a stupa and holds a spectacular three-dimensional mandala with Dainichi Nyōrai[3] seated in the middle.

[3] Japanese name of Vairocana, a celestial Buddha particularly important in Mahayana Buddhism.



Figure 1: Konpon Daito Pagoda
Source: the author

Traditionally, pilgrims would make the ascent to Kōya-san on the Chōishi-michi trail, stretching 24 kilometers and marked by 109-meter intervals using stone markers in the shape of a Gorintō, which resembles a five-element pagoda, representing the elements that make up the world – earth, water, fire, wind, and ether. Traditionally, female pilgrims were not allowed on the mountain and, as a result, a system of sub-temples around the summit developed, allowing them to circumambulate the sacred space at the edge of the mandala without actually entering it.

Entering the Womb World

Nowadays several temples across Japan are known for offering their visitors a unique sensory experience of entering the sacred space of the womb, called *Tainai Meguri* ("going around in the womb"). Conceptualized as a metaphorical rebirth in the womb of the motherly goddess of compassion, Kannon, these spaces are usually in the form of subterranean corridors in complete darkness, often directly below the main altar of the temple where visitors are guided by a rope or a chain of beads, treading through the liminal state between death and new life.

According to visitor guidelines at the Zuigu-dō Hall within the Kiyomizu temple complex in Kyoto, the subterranean hall is regarded "as the womb of Zuigu-Bosatsu[4]. That is why it is completely dark inside, and there is supposed to be no space for your attachment.

[4] A female Bodhisattva known to have the power to grant any human wish.

After you are out through the womb, you will purify yourself and feel the rebirth with the virtue of Zuigu-Bosatsu" (Kiyomizu-dera, 2025).

Another famous example of this is the Zenkō temple (Nagano city) where visitors circumambulate an absolutely hidden (i.e. never shown to the public) Buddha statue above the underground hallway (Suzuki, 2011, 7). It is interesting to point out that in Japanese, the same kanji compound word, *tainai* (胎内), is used for both referring to the interior of a woman's womb and the interior of a Buddhist statue.

Besides the Zuigu-dō Hall mentioned above, I have also experienced this rite in one of the temples on Kōya-san, in Daishōin on Miyajima Island, off the coast of Hiroshima, and in Nata-dera, Ishikawa Prefecture. Although each experience was unique, the element they all have in common is the darkness, which is often an important element of Buddhist sacred spaces. Similarly, the main hall of Enryaku-ji on Mt. Hiei is veiled in darkness, giving the impression of endless space stretching onward from the last pair of barely visible pillars illuminated by flames of lanterns whose purpose is "not to light up the space, but to intensify the darkness" (Suzuki, 2011, 7).

Darkness is one of the key characteristics of sacredness and sacred space in Japan and is also analogous to the esoteric Womb World Mandala, which, together with the Diamond World Mandala, forms the Mandala of the Two Worlds (Grotenhuis, 1998, 3), featured prominently in Japanese esoteric Buddhism and usually hung on opposite walls inside the temple halls such as the aforementioned Konpon Daito on Kōya-san.

Crossing the Threshold: Boundaries to Other Worlds

Having established where and how the Japanese conceptualized sacred space we can turn to something equally important – its boundaries and entrances – "portals" to the Other World. Spatial boundaries, such as the village boundary, shoreline, forest edge etc., were representative of liminal gaps between this world and the Womb dimension and considered the lines at which a fissure opened into the Other World (Williams, 1997, 42).

> Boundaries are where order meets disorder or anti-order. When "we" (people on the side of order) come into contact with such realms, we are overwhelmed by a sense of the unfamiliar, resulting sometimes in pleasure, sometimes in fear. (Komatsu, 2017, 185)

In her 2002 book The Emergence of Boundaries, Norio Akasaka points out that we live in an era "when all boundaries are on the verge of being erased, and in which, therefore, the old world (or cosmology) of space and time divided by visible boundaries seems on the brink of invalidation" (Akasaka, 2002, as cited in Komatsu, 2017, 184–185). While it may be true that boundaries are being redefined in contemporary societies, Japanese landscape is still abundant with symbolic entrances to divine areas which indicate the border between the sacred and secular worlds (Matsui, 2013, 31).

> We have like a feeling that if you pass through something, for instance torii5 or tunnel, the other world is coming. Have you ever watched Spirited Away? So we feel like the Other World is very close… In Shimane Prefecture there is a stone, and this is a boundary between the living and the other world. Yomotsu Hirasaka. You can feel that the other world is very close when you are there. Just like a boundary. (interview with a Shinto priest, 28. April 2025)

The boundary Yomotsu Hirasaka (Shimane Prefecture) is particularly infamous, since it has been one of the traditional entrances to the world of the dead, appearing twice in *Kojiki*

[5] A *torii* is a freestanding gate, typically consisting of two vertical pillars and two horizontal crossbars, that marks the symbolic entrance to a Shinto shrine. It delineates the boundary between the sacred space of the shrine and the profane world.

(Record of Ancient Matters, 712). I visited the site after nightfall, which added even more mystery to the ambiance of the entire area. Upon arrival, the visitor is greeted with multiple information boards that explain the mythological background and cultural significance of the site. Above them, there is a pathway beginning with a stone *torii* bound by *shimenawa* ropes and culminating with two unusually shaped boulders, on each side of the so-called entrance.

Many superstitions still surround the place, for example, one university professor confessed to me that her colleagues absolutely refuse to take photographs in that area. The fact that the supposed entrance has a physical location in this world alludes to the idea that in Japan the Other World is very near to the one we are living in. This was reiterated to me in conversation with a professional storyteller of *kaidan*, Japanese horror stories with supernatural elements:

> Ano yo and kono yo (That World and This World) are very close. In Japan, such boundaries and borderlines are very important. The shrines have torii which mark outside and inside world. The temples also have sanmon ("gates"). Shimenawa ropes also create the border, naka and soto ("inside" and "outside"). River [as in], Sanzu no Kawa, kocchi to acchi ("over here" and "over there"). On the other side of the river was another land. Yūrei and obake ("ghosts" and "monsters") and so on were plenty on the other side of the borderline. [There were also] tunnels, for example. (interview with a kaidan storyteller, 26.4.2025)

Torii, one of the most recognizable and iconic symbols of Japan, marks the entrance to a shrine. They divide the realm of humans outside, and the realm of the *kami,* placed within. Many people believe it is best to pass under the *torii* instead of going around it, as if not to improperly enter the sacred domain (Williams, 1997, 162). Additionally, they can signify a numinous object when placed in front of it, such as trees or boulders, or even mark a whole area or forest as sacred (Gilday, 1993, 279). A common accompanying element are *shimenawa*, twisted hemp ropes with zig-zag shaped papers, called *shide,* tied to them. They can be hung on *torii*, under the roof of the shrine or tied around the object itself. In essence, they signify not just the boundary to the sacred, but the sacred objects themselves.

When visiting Shinto shrines, the visitors are usually confronted with a boundary beyond which lay practitioners cannot pass. The inner shrine called *honden*, the place where the *kami* resides, is usually off limits to the public and often not much can be seen from the ultimate vantage point – the most sacred place is also the best hidden one. This invisibility, in a sense, protects and secures the place for *kami* (Kawano, 2005, 63), by keeping it away from any human influence and pollution.



Figure 2: House and *torii* with *shimenawa*
Source: the author

Sacred space for *kami* can also be bound and thus created temporarily, for example during the land purification ceremony:

> We just set up the four bamboo poles and tie the rope and the shide. This is an area of sacred place. So, if you pass through that area, you enter the realm where kami are invited. This is kind of like passing through another world. (interview with a Shinto priest, 28.4.2025)

The contemporary Shinto land purification ritual bears resemblance to the ancient rites which marked the possession of the new land and the establishment of its boundaries (Grapard, 1982, 197) with binding things, hinting at the continuity of practices for the sacralization of space. The features of the landscape are, however, not intrinsically boundaries – landscape features can only become boundaries, or the indicators of a boundary, in relation to the activities of the people for whom they are recognized or experienced as such (Ingold, 1993, 156).

> People often refer to bridges, rivers, mountain ridges, or crossroads as boundaries, as though this were an obvious fact. But considering the above definition reveals just how much clarification such statements require. To whom does the bridge represent a boundary? Why is it a boundary – or, depending on the circumstances, why not? (Komatsu, 2017, 182)

The bridge is one of the most important manmade elements of the landscape, connecting two sides of a river or chasm, making passage possible – essentially connecting two spaces on both a physical and metaphorical level. An example of this is the stage bridge from Noh theatre, *hashi-gakari*, which serves both functions since, according to the information gathered at Kanazawa Noh Museum, it "physically connects the backstage to the main stage, and metaphorically is a border between the real and supernatural world" (Kanazawa Noh Museum, 2025).



Figure 3: Hashi-gakari in Nagoya Nōgaku-dō (Noh Theatre)
Source: the author

Bridges are also featured prominently in the landscape of Kōya-san, for which we have previously established that it represents the Mandala World, with the whole area of the mountain being considered a sacred space. The traditional entrance to the mountain is a red bridge called Gokurakubashi. In crossing it "pilgrims left the world of defilements and entered the world that purifies" (Payne 2008). The bridge, in close proximity to the last train station, is nowadays somewhat overshadowed by the cable car, which provides passengers a direct connection to the summit.



Figure 4: The original Gokurakubashi
Source: the author

Interestingly, the open hallway, signaled even in English and linking the cable car and train stations is adorned by imagery of a red bridge, "connecting the secular world and the sacred" (Nankai Electric Railway 2025), serving as a simulated crossing: "There is a legend that the border between the sanctuary and the everyday world is Gokurakubashi. Here is the beginning of your journey to the sanctuary."



Figure 5: Gokurakubashi cable car station walkway
Source: the author

On the mountain itself multiple bridges are featured within the most famous cemetery in all of Japan – Oku-no-in, each of them representing a crossing of the boundary into an even more sacred zone of the cemetery: "there are actually three bridges to enter. Like stages, first stage, second stage […]" (interview with a Shingon monk, 25. April 2025). The last bridge marked the entrance to the most sacred area on Kōya-san, the mausoleum of Kōbō Daishi – Kūkai, where a signboard asks visitors that, after this point, to refrain from taking photos, eating or drinking or acting inappropriately.

Although spatial boundaries are the most widely represented in Japan, there are also some examples of aural and temporal boundaries. An example of the former are temple bells,

struck to mark the time or musical performances which signify the appearance of *oni* (demon) and other *yōkai* in rituals and performances (Komatsu, 2017, 191). It is also often believed that a spirit of a departed person may be called back to this world by the voice of spiritual mediums (Matsumura, 2007).

The temporal dimension can be understood through the binary opposition of sacred time, which is primordial and mythological, and "erupts" into profane time, through different calendrical rites such as village *matsuri* (festivals), recitation of founding myths, and pilgrimages to sacred sites (Nadeau, 1996, 113). Definitely, the most important temporal boundary in Japan is between life and death and is often represented both symbolically and spatially via funerary send-offs of the deceased and the concept of the riverbank, called "*Sai no Kawara*" between our world and the Other World. Furthermore, the spring equinox, called the "far shore" (*o-higan*) is a time when ancestors return to the world of the living (Williams, 1997, 61).

Among the Ainu, there exists a significant difference between time in both worlds – a day in the other world corresponds to a year in this one (Umehara, 1991, 168), while all across Japan the day-night cycle itself also carries an important temporal boundary:

> For example, the time between day and night. Sunset time. Day is the time of humans, of living things; the night is the time of dead things. The time in-between does not belong to either. The time when the worlds come close. (interview with a kaidan storyteller, 26.4.2025)

This fascination with the liminality of twilight was already recorded in the writings of Japan's earliest folklorist, Kunio Yanagita, for whom this twilight zone was poetically "at once a time where vision becomes indistinct as shadows lengthen, and a space where the objective and the imaginary blur and transform" (Jensen, Ishii, & Swift, 2016, 157). The Japanese word for twilight, *tasokare* (誰そ彼), includes the characters for "who", as it was seen as a time of uncertain identities (Figal, 1999, 5) – you could not ascertain the face of a person passing by on the path at that hour, so a greeting is roughly equivalent to the phrase "who is there?", employed to make sure that the other person is human, and not a dangerous phantasm.

Tasokare does not "simply indicate the dusk as an in-between period transitioning from day to night, but also a hybrid moment in which visible entities become invisible and hidden presences momentarily reveal themselves" (Castiglioni, 2019, 173). More recently, the concept was heavily featured in Makoto Shinkai's animated blockbuster "*Your Name"*, where the twilight time enabled the protagonists to be able to meet each other even though they were living in different Worlds.

Contemporary Influence of Traditional Cosmologies

Conceptions of the Other World in Japan have always been fluid and subject to change. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was a major turning point for traditional beliefs, since it was during that time that Japan started introducing Western categories of "science", "philosophy" and "religion" and, as a result, certain elements of traditional cosmologies got sorted as proper "religion" and others as primitive "superstition". In 1873, the Gregorian calendar was adopted, replacing the lunar calendar and marking the beginning of a new chronology in Japan, bringing with it a new set of cosmological and temporal assumptions (Miura, 2024, 111). Although initially suppressed and dismissed, traditional beliefs were eventually reconciled and reintegrated into modern worldviews.

Despite many Japanese who are now identifying as non-religious, the influence of traditional religious cosmologies continues to be evident in many segments of Japanese

society, with tens of millions of people visiting shrines and temples for various rites of passage and festivities. From my experiences of visiting many Buddhist temples across the country, it is definitely the older generations for whom temple visits represent a form of personal religious and ritual practice. Meanwhile younger people, that would ascribe themselves a certain degree of religiosity, tend to frame it through concepts such "*supirichuaritī*" (i.e. spirituality). Non-sectarian and not even necessarily felt as religious, spirituality as understood in Japan can encompass anything from New Age practices to traditional forms of divination, *fū sui*[6], sometimes even reframing traditional forms of religiosity through a contemporary lens, such as in the case of "power spot" (see Rots 2014) visits.

> In one way or another, "the ancient cosmology and cosmography continue to exert considerable influence over various aspects of daily life in contemporary Japan, from customs associated with funeral rites and festivals, to quite profound effects on the landscape features and land use associated with many mountains and all Shinto shrines. (Palmer, 1994, 485)

Japanese geographers agree that traditional systematization of space still plays a role in spatial relations of landscape features in present-day Japan (Palmer, 1994, 480–484). From the land claiming ceremony to the rite of completing a building and the purification of the new dwelling, as ways of expressing gratitude to the *kami* (Williams 1997, 217; Šmitek 2016, 310), such practices are even today still the rule, not the exception.

Many spatial principles, for example differentiating lucky or unlucky days, directions, etc., were imported from China. The Japanese court readily adopted theories of the universe combining Buddhist cosmology, the yin-yang paradigm, divination, astrology and geomancy (see Buhrman, 2024) under the umbrella term of *fū sui* (Miura, 2024, 108). Formerly court magicians, the magical specialists of the art called *Onmyōji* (Jolivalt, 2012) are still consulted to make sure that "a business is aligned auspiciously to encourage success" (Muir, 2024).

One particularly unfavorable element is the so-called Demon Gate, *Kimon,* the northeastern direction that is believed to be an opening for demons and other evil spirits to enter. That is why on Mount Hiei, which lies northeast of Kyoto, a city historically designed according to principles of *fū sui*, a Buddhist temple complex of the Tendai school was built to protect the capital at the time from negative influences. More recently, in the 1990s and 2000s, the idea that Kyoto is animated by various invisible agencies saw a revival, and multiple construction projects that wanted to contribute to the energetic balance of the city were carried out (Van Goethem, 2019, 82). Besides Kyoto, Nara, and Kamakura, Tokyo is one of the cities in Japan with the richest cosmological undercurrents (see Jinnai 1995). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the construction of the SkyTree tower has gotten a lot of attention for its design and placement. While some criticized it for having bad *fū sui*, others pointed out the fact that its shape, reminiscent of a five-element Buddhist pagoda, will thus protect Tokyo for years to come (Williams, 2017). Even today, people are careful when considering the placement of windows and doors so as not to offer the spirits an opening into their dwelling.

The influence of traditional cosmological systems is not limited only to the configuration of sacred spaces and landscapes however, as the Other World is a recurring theme in both popular culture and literature. In the anime world, the genre of *Isekai*, literally "another world", where the protagonist is transported or reborn in an alternate universe/reality, has become very popular in recent years (see Hack, 2023). This renewed interest could even be considered as revival of sorts, since we can find an abundance of similar tropes in literature of the medieval period. In the world of contemporary literature, Japanese authors

[6] The Chinese art of geomancy *feng shui* as it is pronounced in Japanese.

have wholeheartedly embraced the genre of magical realism. Most famously, the works of Haruki Murakami often prominently feature Other Worlds (Strecher, 1999), such as in *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) and *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). These examples further prove that the idea of the Other World has had an enduring presence throughout Japanese history and remains an important concept even today. As Murakami himself puts it:

> In Japan, I think that other world is very close to our real life, and, if we decide to go to the other side, it's not so difficult […] Right next to the world we live in, the one we're all familiar with, is a world we know nothing about, an unfamiliar world that exists concurrently with our own. The structure of that world, and its meaning, can't be explained in words. But the fact is that it's there, and sometimes we catch a glimpse of it, just by chance – like when a flash of lightning illuminates our surroundings for an instant. (Murakami, 2018, 2019)

Conclusion: Future Other Worlds in Japan

The examples presented in this paper mostly drew from the cosmological influences that Buddhism brought to Japan and are by no means intended to be an exhaustive representation of the rich tapestry of beliefs and conceptualizations of the Other World through Japanese history. For example, much could be said about the parallel developments of indigenous cosmological beliefs and their eventual separation from Buddhism, a process that culminated in the present-day Shinto tradition (see Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981).

Nonetheless, Buddhist thought was a highly influential ideological engine that, through the centuries, redefined the spiritual landscape of Japan and gave rise to sacred spaces with varying degrees of scale and complexity. Mountain ranges and sacred peaks were made analogous to and explained through mandalas – representations of sacred space that served not only as powerful tools for its navigation, but also as means of attaining enlightenment. Practices such as womb-entry rites ritualized the crossing of spatial thresholds, enabling participants to symbolically traverse into parallel dimensions which in one way or another continue to exist in contemporary Japan. In the present day, Other Worlds are not only available through religious practices, but are also integrated within fields such as in architecture, urban planning, popular media and modern literature.

Further research on alternative realities in Japan could potentially examine how they are negotiated in emerging contexts – for example, the use of modern technology to transport individuals into digital, augmented, and virtual environments. As the number of people living in cities and by themselves is steadily increasing, it is not surprising that new methods for transposing oneself into constructed Other Worlds are being created. Only time will tell how these phenomena will continue to develop and what impact they will have on Japan's social and ontological landscape.

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