Ioannis Gaitanidis

The "Questionable" as Method
Yoshinaga Shin'ichi and Research Methodology

Beyond and besides concepts that in the last twenty years have come to adorn the scholarly work with which Professor Yoshinaga became associated, such as esotericism, occultism or *reijutsu* (霊術, lit. "spiritual techniques" or "extraordinary techniques"), there is one word that he often uttered to describe his research, and that was *ayashii* or, the better version (see later), *ayashige*. Usually translated as "suspicious," "dubious," or "questionable," *ayashii* may also sound, in colloquial Japanese, derisory and the subjects it is attached to perhaps laughable. However, even if Yoshinaga himself sometimes used the word in an ironic tone and as a shortcut to a longer explanation about where his interests lay, *ayashii* was much more than that. In Yoshinaga's case, it announced that he was concerned with the people who espoused things *ayashii*, and secondly, that the category of "religion" could not encompass everything that the adjective *ayashii* referred to, and, by extent, his object of research. In this sense, Yoshinaga was somewhat ahead of his time: he endeavoured to study seriously individuals who, later, an entire field of study focussed upon because they had been "rejected" (Hanegraaff 2012), and to do that, he knew that he had to work through and across the ideological, disciplinary, and national networks that his predecessors and contemporaries were already familiar with.

Ayashige and the possibilities of doubting questionable things

Michael Dylan Foster has noted that the character 怪 found in the Heian period concept of 物の怪 (*mono-no-ke*) and later in the (now more popularly known) concept of 妖怪 (*yōkai*), evokes "the suspicious, the uncertain, the unstable" (Foster 2009, 6). And he argues that as part of *yōkai*, the role of this character, which bears the same meaning as the first character of 妖, is to double down on doubtfulness, with the resulting meaning of "doubting

Japanese Religions, Vol. 45 (1 & 2): 9–15

the doubt." For Foster, instability is accompanied by a sense of possibility and suspiciousness calls for some sort of ironic imagination: an immersion into the questionable all the while knowing that it is questionable (Foster 2009, 14). Without trying to read too much into the etymological essence of Chinese characters and bearing in mind that, as Foster shows, the meaning of words like *yōkai* tends to shift through history, I claim that the above extrapolation on what *ayashii* could refer to reflects the stance from which Yoshinaga attended to the objects of his research. In other words, for Yoshinaga, the questionability of the practices and beliefs of the historical figures he unearthed opened possibilities for questioning how those beliefs and techniques had been categorized until then. And most of the time, he succeeded in showing the ineffectiveness of established categories to account for these beliefs and practices, not because the categories were wrong but because they ignored the complexity of the individuals who promulgated or who often had created these beliefs and practices in the first place.

Indeed, in a long interview published on the website of the Centre for Shin Buddhist Studies, Yoshinaga explains his motivation for entering the UFO Parapsychology Research Group (*Yūfō chōshinri kenkyūkai*, or *Yūchōken*) during his undergraduate studies at the University of Kyoto as follows: "rather than questionable (*ayashige*) things themselves, I was more interested in the people who believe (those) questionable things."[1] Note here that, instead of *ayashii*, Yoshinaga employs the suffix *-ke* (気) to convey an even milder version of the word: the things he talks about are questionable, perhaps only in appearance. It is not about what is questionable or not. Or even why something is questionable or not. Yoshinaga was more interested in why and how people became enthused with things that some would consider questionable. In this sense, Yoshinaga never tried to work with distinctions between science and religion, rationality and belief, intellectual and popular culture, and the like. Even if he had answers when prompted to comment on the relationship between such dichotomies, his work was more concerned with what it means to take people with "questionable" ideas seriously, albeit without taking such ideas at face value or placing them in pre-established categories of human endeavour and psychology. This is where, in my case at least, Yoshinaga has been the most influential: what would be a scholarly way to understand people who invest their lives into acts that are in appearance questionable?

1. See http://www.shinran-bc.higashihonganji.or.jp/interview021_yoshinaga01/ (accessed on 24 March 2023). The original quote in Japanese is:「怪しげなこと自体よりも、怪しげなことを信じる人に興味があったんですね」.

A brief vignette of Yoshinaga's research methodology

Considering his research interests in what during the 1970s was popularly called the "occult," Yoshinaga was bound to be drawn to the study of the "spiritual world" (*seishin sekai*) and (global) spirituality that started attracting the attention of sociologists of religion in Japan in the 1990s. Even though, as a historian, he never really published on the subject of contemporary *supirichuariti* (with a few exceptions),[2] he kept up with scholarly work on the topic and often invited scholars of contemporary spirituality to workshops and conference panels as presenters and discussants. His stance, however, was distinct. Drawing from a published conversation he had in the late 1990s during a workshop on the *seishin sekai*, I illustrate below how the *ayashige* in Yoshinaga's case, was a methodology, and how, in conjunction, this allowed him to avoid the fallacies that scholars of "alternative religion" risk committing. In brief, by putting "questionability" at the centre of what he studied, Yoshinaga avoided the religionist attitudes of his contemporaries. By religionism here, I refer to "an approach to religion that presents itself explicitly as historical but nevertheless denies, or at least strongly minimizes, the relevance of any questions pertaining to historical "influences," and hence of historical criticism, because of its central assumption that the true referent of religion does not lie in the domain of human culture and society but only in a direct, unmediated, personal experience of the divine" (Hanegraaf 2012, 149).

As I describe in more detail in my monograph (Gaitanidis 2022, 44–72), many of the scholars who became associated with the academic study of *supirichuariti* at the start of this century had participated in a series of workshops held during the annual meetings of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (JASRS) in the late 1990s. The first of these workshops, titled *The Structure of the Spiritual World: Clues to Understanding the Consciousness of Contemporary Society and People* (精神世界の構図―現代社会と現代人の意識を理解する手がかりとして―) was held in 1997 and the proceedings published in March 1998, in the supplement volume of JARS' journal, *Religion & Society* (pp.6–41). The workshop took Shimazono Susumu's study of the *seishin sekai* (1996) as its starting point. In other words, and like some of the *supirichuariti* scholars who would later also abide by this, the idea was that a study of the *seishin sekai* was going to reveal something about the contemporary religious culture in Japan. In a sense, therefore, the inclusion of Professor Yoshinaga's paper in the workshop and

2.「日本の霊的思想の過去と現在」樫尾直樹 編『スピリチュアリティを生きる：新しい絆を求めて』〈せりかクリティク〉せりか書房、2002年.

his presentation on "The New Age and the Occult: A Kind of Intellectual History" already shed a doubt on the workshop's objective, because his conclusions identified already a set of ideological continuities (with several interpretational shifts) that were neither particular to religious cultures—Yoshinaga noted the 19th-century connections with socialism, for example—nor, in fact, to Japan; Yoshinaga keeps jumping from Europe to the United States throughout the paper, clearly indicating that this was a global phenomenon. By the end of the paper, the *seishin sekai* seemed neither new nor uniquely "religious."

The possibilities that Yoshinaga's approach opened for the study of alternative religion in Japan become even clearer when one reads the minutes of the conversation that followed the presentations of that day in 1997.[3] More specifically, Yoshinaga seems to have intervened three times in the workshop roundtable, and all of his responses concerned the same subject: the "counter-cultural" nature of the *seishin sekai*, which, unlike the other workshop participants, he denies. His argument is, first of all, experiential. Having been himself part of that generation and deeply involved with people enthused with all things "occult" in the 1970s, he notes that perhaps only half was leaning politically to the left. The rest and the older generation, i.e. those already in their 30s at the time, were not interested in politics. The fact that Yoshinaga knew the field from the inside already made him stand out among the rest of his interlocutors. He was not trying to make big claims about large social processes because he knew things on the ground were a bit more complicated than they later appeared.

His first intervention in the roundtable did not seem to convince the rest of the group, and one page later, Yoshinaga intervenes again in two consecutive replies. First, he notes that, perhaps unlike Europe and the United States, there was not much of a counter-culture in Japan. He argues that Japanese New Agers were the "froth" of society, a sort of "over culture" (*obaa karuchaa*), which puts in doubt the counter-cultural ethos that we want to associate with them (Yoshinaga 1998, 39). On hearing this, Mori Kōichi, a historian of American religions, reacts by disagreeing with Yoshinaga and by suggesting that one should consider the atmosphere of that generation as an anti-thesis of the ethos of "trying one's best" (*isshōkenmei ganbaru*), which he claims was the ethos of his own (older) generation. In that sense, Mori argued that the youth of the late 1960s and early 1970s were counter-cultural, because (the reader assumes) they were not "trying their best." Yoshinaga's response to Mori's reactions (and last intervention to

3. Freely available on J-Stage: https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/religionandsociety/3/Suppl/3_KJ00006480475/_article/-char/ja

the roundtable) is a perfect example of his methodological approach to the questionable. I have copied it in its entirety below.[4]

> I don't know if it can be called a counterculture simply because the next thing to emerge in response to the economic ethos (of "economic miracle"-Japan, *n.o.a*) was an inward-looking ethos. A counterculture is supposed to exist in a main culture vs counterculture context, but in Japan, it [what seemed like a counter-culture *n.o.a*] was simply a cultural shift. In contrast, the Western counterculture seems to have a kind of nucleus that transcends generations. I think the occult esoteric culture I reported on is one of those nuclei. It has been objecting to the over-culture, the exoteric culture, for generations, and, as a result, it has become sedimentary without ever being accepted. So, (for us) it looks like a counter to the main culture (Yoshinaga 1998, 39).

Two methodological perspectives can be gleaned from this brief intervention by Yoshinaga. First, Yoshinaga doubts the evolutionary view of social change that seeks to identify distinct "moods" and key-historical moments that are used to claim for larger cultural shifts. His questioning of the counter-cultural character of the 1970s generation in Japan directly proves this. He was more interested in what historical continuities and subtler shifts said about individuals living during a certain period and not how these individuals may represent larger societal changes. He was, in other words, careful about generalizing overtly visible (and from our current perspective) questionable beliefs and practices as indicative of social "booms" (*būmu*).

Secondly, Yoshinaga makes another important methodological comment in the above paragraph. He argues, like many scholars of esotericism later argued, that what appears to counter mainstream is, in fact, also part of the mainstream. It only appears as separate because it is an embedded political critique of "loud," overtly visible and accepted culture. He suggests, therefore, that the questionable is a structural component of the

4. The original text:「経済的なエートスに対して、次に出てきたのが内面的なものであったということだけで、カウンターカルチャーと言えるかどうか。カウンターカルチャーというのは、メインのカルチャーがあって、カウンターが存在するはずですけれども、日本では単なるカルチャーの交代ではなかったか。これに対して、欧米のカウンターカルチャーには、世代を越えた核のようなものがあるように思います。私が報告した、オカルト的なエソテリックな文化というのは、核の中の一つにあたると思うんです。世代を越えてオーバーカルチャー、エクステリックなカルチャーにたいして異議申し立てをしてきたし、受け入れられないまま下の方に沈殿している。だからメインに対するカウンターという感じがするんです。」

mainsteam that we (wrongly and) usually oppose it to. Yoshinaga's later work on the entanglements between Buddhism and Theosophy in Modern Japan consists of the case study *par excellence* of what he already hints at here.

In my monograph, I take inspiration from Yoshinaga's approach to examine the rise of scholarship on spirituality in Japan and summarize my critique in two points (see Gaitanidis 2022, 67–68). First, I argue that scholars of spirituality have exclusively associated the so-called new spirituality culture with contemporaneous social changes. In other words, the "new" in religion had to mirror the "new in society," which is something that Yoshinaga was, in my knowledge, vehemently opposed to. And secondly, these scholars failed to employ the heuristic value of the concept of spirituality to question "religion" as a *sui generis* phenomenon. This is exactly what Yoshinaga was trying to achieve through his study of another heuristic term, *okaruto*. Instead, for scholars of spirituality, individuals or entire communities taken as representative cases of the "new spirituality culture" in Japan were defined by the degree to which their words were abstractedly compared to a corpus of messages that, by the late 1990s, had already been labelled *seishin sekai* (and later *supirichuariti*). Yoshinaga avoided pre-set categorizations, because he knew that the people he studied did so too.

Questionability as a research stance

In religious studies, considering the beliefs of the people we come across as "questionable" during fieldwork is, of course, not rare, even if that is not really a matter that we take into account in our methodologies. We are, after all, not meant to (*a priori*) let our individual assumptions blur our objects of analysis. Textual summaries of doctrines or other types of religious texts, as well as ethnographic descriptions of people's behaviour, rituals and the like, often give away enough for the reader to decide by themselves whether or not they find some beliefs and practices questionable, notwithstanding matters that would be considered illegal in one's context. But if we stop for a minute to think about all the instances that we may have caught ourselves grinning during a conference presentation about "the occult" or a light-hearted discussion with colleagues who are equally aware of the questionability of their topic of research, we perhaps realize that talking about the themes Yoshinaga dedicated his life to studying, requires a certain effort of concealment and play. Concealment of our private and personal stances towards what we may consider questionable, and play with the stances of others, including our audiences. Yoshinaga knew about this,

but although he certainly played with and relied on his audiences' categorical assumptions about "religion," "superstition" or "science," to make his arguments, he never seemed to conceal that some (if not all) of the individuals he studied were *ayashii*. But that was not a collateral feature of his research, it was precisely the reason he considered them worth studying.

References

Foster, Michael Dylan. 2009. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2012. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gaitanidis, Ioannis. 2022. *Spirituality and Alternativity in Contemporary Japan: Beyond Religion?* (Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Shimazono Susumu. 1996. *Seishin sekai no yukue: Gendai sekai to shinreisei undō*, Tokyo: Tōkyōdō-shuppan.

Yoshinaga Shin'ichi. 1998. "Zentai tōgi no gaiyō (Wākushoppu (1) "Seishin sekai" no kōzō (1): Gendai shakai to gendaijin no ishiki o rikai suru tegakari toshite)," *Shūkyō to shakai* (*Religion and Society*) 3 (Suppl.): 35–42.