

Shin'ichi Yoshinaga (1957–2022)

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Born in Shimizu, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan in 1957, as the first son of Shuji Yoshinaga and Chieko Yoshinaga (née Ozawa), Shin'ichi Yoshinaga graduated from Humanities (Religious Studies), Kyoto University in 1983. After working as an English teacher for two years in Sakai Municipal Industrial High School, Osaka, he entered the Postgraduate School of Humanities (Religious Studies), Kyoto University in 1985 and completed a Ph.D. program without a Ph.D. degree in 1990.¹ He worked in Maizuru Polytechnic as a Lecturer (1995–) and as a Professor (2015–2020). After six years and four months fighting against cancer, he died in 2022, a couple of weeks after his 65th birthday, leaving his wife Yukari and two daughters. Most of his major works such as *The Origin of the International Buddhist Network* (2015, co-authored with Naoki Nakanishi), *Modern Buddhism Studies* (2016, with Eiichi Ohtani and others), and *Theosophy and Buddhism* (2021), are written in Japanese, but works written in English such as “Three Boys on a Great Vehicle: ‘Mahayana Buddhism’ and a Trans-National Network” (2014), “The Birth of Japanese Mind Cure Methods” (2015), and “Western Esotericism and Its Influence” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions* (2021) are also highly appreciated. His major activities in academia include membership of the Editorial Board of The Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (2006–2010), membership of the Management

1. This reflects Japanese specific system of issuing Ph.D. of Humanities in our generation. The degree was given to an experienced scholar only at the end of his/her career, usually when he/she retires from university.

Committee (2010–2022), Council (2011–2022), and Editorial Board (2010–2022) of the Society for the Study of Modern Japanese Buddhist History, and the Editorial Board of *Correspondences* (2020–2022).

In its 81st Annual Conference, the Japanese Association for Religious Studies held a session to commemorate the academic achievements of Shin'ichi Yoshinaga (1957–2022). It is exceptional to hold a forum for reminiscence in the same year as someone's demise, and this indicates how unique and pioneering his challenge was of reassessing the multiple contacts Japanese Buddhism made with foreign religious movements in its modernizing years, especially New Thought and Theosophy, traditions that the mainstream of Japan's academics took little heed of before. What he did was to target materials which were long deemed unworthy of academic study, and thus opened a new way for researching the combination of things well-known and obscure. It will take several years to comprehensively review his achievement, and it is certain that this will increase the already high regard for him. To show you who Shin'ichi Yoshinaga was, however, I dare to mention my personal memories of him, desiring to reveal the origin of Yoshinaga's broad interest in esoteric subjects—his strong attachment to stories narrating paranormal phenomena.

Once I visited Yoshinaga, who lived alone in Kyoto. I knew him when I was young, and he was the same age as me. We would come to call each other with surname title omitted, a sign of intimacy in Japanese society. He had entered the postgraduate course of his alma mater Kyoto University in 1985, after spending several years as a high school teacher in Osaka; therefore, this episode happened in our early thirties. After a humble dinner at a Ramen shop (Kyoto is full of good Ramen shops and he was pretty well-versed in them) we drove through the dark streets of Northern Kyoto without any specific destination. Yoshinaga was an enthusiastic motorbike rider in his undergraduate days but gave it up, for reasons unknown to me. So he preferred to stay in the seat beside me when I invited him for a drive even if we had nowhere to go. We used to talk about everything while roaming the city at night. We had much in common at that

time, and were never short of things to talk about. As he knew the geography of Kyoto well, my task was only to follow his navigation. A little after midnight that day, he suggested that I drive up Mount Kurama.

Mount Kurama is a part of a chain of lower hills encircling Northern Kyoto, and historically known as the place of practice for Mountain Ascetics. Mountain Asceticism or Shugendo is a folk religion established in Japan's late antiquity by merging Buddhist elements with indigenous Shinto mountain worship. Numerous folktales of Shugendo are associated with Mount Kurama, among which are stories narrating an imaginary entity called Tengu, who is said to occupy the central part. Tengu was a term of Esoteric Buddhism originally signifying a specific state of mind when a meditator immerses himself deep enough to wield supernatural powers but suddenly all kinds of misfortune fall upon him. Unless the practitioner understands that such powers are meaningless, and that this is one of the meditational steps he must pass through, the true way to enlightenment does not open to him. Such a psychological state, the stage those practitioners of Esoteric Buddhism called Tengu's coming, was personified in later years, and thus the legends concerning the mythical being Tengu were formed. Iconographically, he is described as a huge human with a ruddy face and long nose, usually clad in Mountain Ascetic attire.

While driving a narrow, unlit road under the dark trees of Mount Kurama, both of us said nothing about Tengu, but definitely its presence in mind prompted Yoshinaga to talk about the famous North American urban legend, Mothman. I don't remember well what he said, except simple information such as its manifestation in West Virginia in the 60s and 70s, its implicit connections with other paranormal phenomena that took place across America, and the creature's weird habit of hovering over the car of a dating couple to stalk them. But I still remember the strange sensation passing through my spine, the instinct to tell me that *we were now on the rim of another world*. I had heard nothing about the legendary monster Mothman before. Presumably, Yoshinaga was then one of the few Japanese who had ordered John Keel's *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975) from the United States and read it carefully.

Yoshinaga was not a simple lover of ghost stories like me. He loved to read Keel because of his strong interest in UFO sightings, and it also formed one part of his preference for paranormal phenomena in general. Wide and deep was his knowledge of these incidents, which included not only cryptids like Mothman, but other little-known issues like the pseudo-ancient history of Japan, the records fabricated by pre-war cultic religious leaders and its parallelism with mind cure movements then popular among common people. At first glance, the knowledge he accumulated seemed chaotic and curiosity-hunting, but I sometimes noticed that he tried to figure out a religious framework that would explain the reasons people are involved with such abnormal phenomena or heretical worldviews. He was a sceptic, but always tried to be sympathetic with those bewitched by weird fictions.

During his postgraduate days, he struggled to theorize this framework in his own words. He extended his study on William James, the subject he started in his undergraduate days, but unfortunately the concentration on James did not bequeath him enough insight to upgrade his research methodology. Something more tangible was necessary to go further, which was what he intended to do. It came with the discovery of an unpublished document left behind by Kinza Hirai (1859-1916), a Theosophist-Buddhist who died more than a century before.

Detailed examination of Hirai allowed Yoshinaga to further his study and expand into neighboring fields. No doubt, Hirai's international activities as a lay Buddhist not only furnished him ample opportunity to know and understand how peripheral streams of Western esotericism ran into multiple Theosophist branches (whose concern was to be harmonized with modernizing Buddhists in Japan), but also turned his eyes to the internal reformation movements of Japanese Buddhism, which at that point were only studied from an apologetic perspective within a closed society of Buddhist monks and scholars. Yoshinaga thus set up a steady procedure of uncovering each of the significant persons Hirai came across in his meandering life, and mapping the thoughts and deeds of them, either Japanese or foreigner, on the historical line of Japanese Buddhism's modernization.

Prior to carrying out the research on the Hirai documents, Yoshinaga visited Professor James Santucci in California in 2001. The suggestion Santucci gave him most likely strengthened his idea of locating a single religious phenomenon in Japan in a wider international context. How to appreciate the conversation between East and West, more correctly, Japan's bargaining with the West about its own spiritual values, has been the greatest problem haunting Japanese intellectuals since this nation embarked on modernization, and Yoshinaga was not an exception. Direct contact with Theosophists in Pasadena, the remnant of Point Loma Colony, helped Yoshinaga enlarge his research scale and deepen his understanding of primary materials. His first academic attempt was the survey of the birth and death of several Theosophist Lodges in Japan, with special references to Buddhist reformers including Kinza Hirai. He first read it at The International Conference on Theosophical History held in London in 2003. This can be also understood as the result of the personal and academic intimacy he established with Western scholars of Buddhism such as Judith Snodgrass, and probably Thomas Tweed.

He started the full-scale research of the Hirai documents in 2009, and from that year to 2012, the record of departures from Japan is missing from his passport. This was the period when he developed his own research method and, more importantly, fostered disciples by working together in diverse research subjects. Many of the younger researchers were trained by him in the process of sorting out primary sources, long forgotten but discovered anew by Yoshinaga or his colleagues. Subsequent to the Hirai documents, he organized a research group to study the documents left by a historically forgotten Buddhist professor Nishu Utsugi, and later set about sorting out untouched documents in DT Suzuki's collection. Considering that Utsugi was a member of Mahayana Lodge, a small lodge of the Theosophical Society DT Suzuki founded in Kyoto in 1923, we understand that Yoshinaga's research projects were carried out in accordance with a certain strategy, no matter how widely dispersed they looked. Many scholars from the younger generations, mostly students of modern Buddhism

and neighboring fields, worked with him and were heavily influenced by his personality and research style. Providing a chance for as many junior researchers as possible was Yoshinaga's basic policy, and this was very effective in removing small but hard borders of specialty separating each speaker. Yoshinaga was skilled at guiding the speakers to a heated debate and issuing proper advice at a critical point. I sometimes heard him talk about how he was proud of nurturing the talented younger researchers. The respect and affection many of them paid to Yoshinaga was genuine and plentiful.

The process of his method's refinement is mainly reflected in the number of research projects or academic sessions he presided over. The trajectory which he achieved is hard to notice without understanding his basic attitude toward academic study. As Yoshinaga's achievement remains chiefly in his career as an organizer, the essence of his study should be sought not in publications such as accomplished volumes or academic papers, but in documents reporting professional conferences or smaller workshops, and particularly in the explanatory notes he wrote for reprinted editions of forgotten authors from pre-war Japan. An editor's note to *Japanese Body, Mind, and Spirit, the Collected Writings of Folk Spiritual Healers* (a collection of rare primary sources he published in 2004) represents this.

From 2012 he had many chances to read at international conferences overseas, and this no doubt indicates that the development of his study entered a new stage. His frequent departures from Japan were a fresh surprise for me, and they amused me at the same time, because it reminded me of his first visit to London in 2003, the pilgrimage he felt so uneasy to do by himself that he asked me to accompany him. I flew to London from Dublin where I was staying for my own research, and arranged our accommodation to receive him. In this stage, friendship with leading researchers of esotericism, particularly scholars like Boaz Huss, Martin Kleimar, and the members of the HHP Centre at the University of Amsterdam, was helpful to enlarge his research frame and to improve the precision of his academic examination. In return, he invited them

and other researchers to the conferences his own research projects sponsored. The highlight was international conferences for the study of Theosophy, held twice in 2017. Young Japanese researchers and students present there learned much from the intellectual excitement generated by the discussion with senior scholars like Joscelyn Godwin and Patrick Deveney. Even in the middle of this stage, however, illness was eroding his body while nobody noticed it.

I am the very person who witnessed it before anyone else. It was when we were busy preparing for our first Theosophy conference, where I was included as a senior member. I was waiting for him at a local railway station to receive some documents necessary for budget processing of the event. He was very hard to catch as his days without classes to teach were then fully booked with multiple academic meetings. When alighting from the train, he complained about a sharp pain in his back and could not take another few steps. I brought him home and made him rest on the bed, but the pain did not leave him. It was the first symptom of his cancer. He was told he had another six months left, in the worst-case scenario. His wife Yukari was desperate to find a better treatment for him. Thanks to the proper combination of chemotherapy and medication, he was able to leave hospital a few months later and gradually resumed a daily life. As he was reluctant to reveal it, his ailment was kept secret, except from his family and closest friends. But Death's dark wings always hung over him.

The time remaining for him was six years and four months after all. Knowing how he used it is the best way to understand who Shin'ichi Yoshinaga was. Marvelous were his vigor and strength of will. Even though absent from the international workshop studying Yoga and Reiki held one month after his hospitalization in 2015, he surprised many of us by attending the Theosophy conferences we hosted two years later, although less than a year had passed since he was discharged from hospital. He was firmly determined to maintain the international network he had cultivated. He dispatched his colleagues or friends to the sessions overseas to which he was invited as a guest speaker. He ordered me

to go twice, to Columbia University in the U.S. and Ben Gurion University in Israel, while another “delegate” was sent to Germany, Australia and other places.

Another remarkable point is that he increased occasions to participate in research projects or sessions. Even in the final phase of his illness when his body no longer could stand moving to remote places, he joined them using videoconference software, a tool the Covid pandemic made familiar to all of us. This was totally against the idea of devoting all of one’s energy and time to make what he or she has studied into an accomplished form and let it remain in history. In spite of his friends’ incessant encouragement (and sometimes scolding), he was reluctant to take what he had spoken in past sessions or contributed to commercial magazines and rewrite it into a monograph with an academic format. His last work and only single-authored volume, *Theosophy and Buddhism* (2021), was published just a year before his death, and it was, against the expectation of academia, a collection of the articles he had written before, compiled by his disciples.

How can we interpret this attitude of grim determination he showed towards the end of his life? I myself have no smart answer, but instinctively it reminds me of his preference for strange stories he showed intensively in his younger days. Somehow related with this is the fact that the project he was involved with most enthusiastically in his final months was an ambitious attempt to review the cultural fashion of postwar Japan, where the interest in paranormal miracles, including UFO sightings and psychic phenomena like spoon-bending, surfaced intermittently. Like many research projects Yoshinaga was concerned with previously, no academic survey has ever made a serious assessment of it. Yoshinaga himself never took the miracles at face value, but always tried to understand and sympathize with the psychological state of those longing for a truth in them. What I saw at the end of his life was Yoshinaga’s gentle face *as a liberal skeptic*, where a playful smile of his younger days also distinctively remained.