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The Influence of the Buddhist Practice of *Sange* on Literary Form: Revelatory Tales

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There was a type of short story in medieval Japan which was essentially a cleric's public meditation on his or her previous lay life and his or her experience of religious awakening. These revelatory tales, or *zange monogatari* 懺悔物語, are a literary transformation of a Buddhist meditative or devotional practice called *sange* 懺悔. The profound importance of Buddhism in medieval Japanese literature has been studied primarily in terms of cultural content, but revelatory tales are a relatively rare instance in which religious practice influenced literary *form.*[1]

In the medieval Japanese context a religious awakening is the sudden revelatory experience of the Buddhist tenet that human sorrows are caused by our ignorant refusal to accept the inevitability of change (*mujō* 無常).[2] By forming attachments to changeable things we virtually invite suffering into our lives. When we grasp the fundamental truth of the inevitability of change, we may be inspired to abandon mundane passions and to strive for enlightenment. Realizing that past emotional attachments hinder enlightenment, we renounce them in order to devote ourselves exclusively to the cultivation of an understanding of religious truths, knowledge of which emancipates us from pain and suffering. *Sange* was the practice of meditatively reviewing those attachments in order to deepen the previously experienced realization of transience. This practice is directly reflected in revelatory tales in which multiple narrators recount, in the first person, their former attachments and emotional losses.

Religious Awakening Stories

Tales describing an emotional loss which triggered such a religious awakening were common in medieval Japan. Modern scholars have labeled them *hosshindan* 発心談. Most are accounts of lost love. One prominent example is *Aki no yo no nagamonogatari* 秋の夜の長物語 (A Long Tale for an Autumn Night), which recounts the ill-fated love affair of Keikai, a monk from Enryakuji, and a young acolyte, Umewaka, from Miidera. Another well-known example is *Yokobue*, in which Takiguchi Tokiyori and Yokobue, whose relationship is opposed by Takiguchi's father, both renounce the transient world and embrace a religious life. The unhappy endings of love affairs are presented in religious awakening stories as the happy beginnings of religious careers. The import of the tales is that the loss of the beloved effects a religious revelation.

The Meaning of "Sange"

In most religious awakening stories a narrator recounts, in the third person, the religious awakening of one central figure. On the other hand, in the subcategory called *zange monogatari* (those tales which emphasize public revelation of the religious experience), the narrative takes the form of two or more monks or nuns telling each other in turn how they came to their religious awakenings. The word *zange* (as it is pronounced when used in a literary context as opposed to a technically religious one) has usually been translated as either "confession" or "repentance." However, neither of these words captures the full sense of the term as it is appears in *zange monogatari*, and both English words carry confusing overtones from the Judeo-Christian tradition. To render *zange monogatari*, therefore, I propose an alternative: "revelatory tales." Here "revelation" is used in its first and general meaning in English: "the act of revealing what was unknown before" and not in the Judeo-Christian theological sense of the act of God revealing divine truth to man.

Further, there is both a public and a private sense in which I use the phrase "the act of revealing what was unknown before." In the public sense revelatory tales depict a "revealing to others." *Zange* is often used in this simple sense of "making public," as the word "confession" is sometimes used in English, and as we shall see it was used in Japanese literature prior to the appearance of the term *zange monogatari*, which dates at least from the early seventeenth century. *Zange monogatari* is an alternate title for *Shichinin bikuni* 七人比丘尼 and the related form *zange sōshi* 懺悔草子

forms part of a variant title of *Sannin hōshi* 三人法師, *Sannin zange sōshi.* The private aspect of "revelation" intended here is the religious awakening itself as it occurs in the heart of a character in the story. To the extent that such a revelation itself is the essential content of revelatory tales, an exploration of its meaning will also contribute to our understanding of the larger category of religious awakening stories which subsumes revelatory tales.

As mentioned above, Japanese literary scholars, in discussing the term *zange*, have emphasized the sense of "confession," as in "to tell" or "to acknowledge." Some Buddhist scholars, on the other hand, have identified an element of "recognition" or "revelation" in the term. Takahashi Kōji, a Buddhist scholar, concentrates on the implications of the Sanskrit term corresponding to *zange*. He points out that *zange* is a compound made up of *zan*, originally pronounced *san* 懺, a transliteration of the Sanskrit *kṣamā* or *kṣamāyati*, and *ge* 悔, a translation of the Sanskrit *āpatti-deśanā*. *Kṣamā*, a feminine noun, means "patience," "forbearance," or "forgiveness," and in the third person *kṣamāyati*, "he asks indulgence," or "he asks for forgiveness" (Monier-Williams 1970, p.326). *Āpatti-deśanā* means "to show or point out one's transgressions or mistakes."

In his discussion of the origin and meaning of *zange*, Takahashi concludes that it referred to asking pardon for transgressions, and comments that he believes it to be similar to confession in the Judeo-Christian tradition. He also argues, however, that inherent in the concept of *kṣamā*, which corresponds to *nin* 忍, "patience" or "endurance," is a concept of recognition, also pronounced *nin* 認. *Zange*, he says, suggests a "revelation" both to one's self and to others, meaning revelation in the two senses of coming to know and of exposing. Purification, the objective of *zange*, is achieved in exposing one's transgressions (Takahashi 1975, pp. 190-91). Takahashi's analysis of *zange* as a revelation to the self accords with the concept of *zange* as realization as seen in the sutra *Bussetsu kan Fugen bosatsu gyōhō kyō* 仏説観普賢菩薩行法経 (T. 9, pp. 389-99),[3] which will be discussed below.

Takahashi goes on, moreover, to interpret the Jōdo (Pure Land) *nenbutsu* 念仏 (the invocation of Amida's name) as *zange*. Takahashi shows that Shan-tao (618-681), Hōnen(1133-1212), and other Pure Land thinkers believed that the recitation of the *nenbutsu* nullified transgressions, that it erased negative karma. According to Pure Land doctrine, Amida Buddha shines his infinite light on anyone who calls upon him; and the caller's transgressions are illuminated, or revealed, by that light. Thus, one of the effects of the *nenbutsu* is revelation (Takahashi 1975, pp. 198-99).

Yamaguchi Yasushi, another Buddhist scholar, defines *zange* as seeking pardon but also identifies an element of revelation in *zange*. He points out that *zange* does not involve repentance of specific acts of wrongdoing. Rather it is the *acknowledgement* that the nature of human existence is such that wrongdoing is inevitable. It is this awareness that leads one to seek enlightenment (Yamaguchi 1969, pp. 10-11).

Although forgiveness is said to be one of the root meanings of *zange*, the sense of the term in the context of revelatory tales by no means involves the feeling of guilt found in the Christian practice of confession or repentance of sins. Rather it resembles more closely the concept of realization, as in one definition of repent: to "change one's mind with regard to past action in consequence of dissatisfaction with it or its results" (Barnhart 1969, pp. 1027-28). The precise meaning of *zange* as it is reflected in *zange monogatari* can best be understood by looking at how it is used in such primary sources as sutras.

In *Ancient Buddhism in Japan*, M. W. de Visser presents valuable material from sutras for an accurate understanding of *zange*, although his reliance on Christian terminology obfuscates his argument. De Visser translates *sange* as "repentance for the sins of the past and present" or "confessing one's sins of the past and correcting one's future actions" (de Visser 1935, II, pp. 274-5). When he describes the content of these rituals, however, we see that they may consist of meditation, contemplation, or invocation of the names of numerous Buddhas. Such activities clearly imply that the goal of "rites of repentance" is enlightenment, and not forgiveness and redemption, as the use of Christian vocabulary leads a reader to believe. The reader may be misled by de Visser's use of "sin" and "evil" as translations for *zai* 罪 and *aku* 悪. *Zai* and *aku* refer to deeds or thoughts which create negative karma and may be better understood if translated as "transgression" or "wrongdoing"; they are essentially synonymous.

To clarify the meaning of *zange*, we may contrast concepts of sin in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. Sin in its Christian sense is essentially "an indifference or opposition to the will of God" (Hastings 1951, XI, p. 541), or "some deliberate and voluntary defiance . . . to a moral law which expresses the will of God, and the breach of which tends to separation from God" (Hastings 1951, I, p. 49). In Buddhism there is no monotheistic God whose will determines moral law nor any personal god, hence there can be no opposition nor breaking of His law and alienation from Him. While there is a strong ethical aspect to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the precepts against taking life, theft, lewd behavior, and the like are ultimately intended as guidelines for conduct that will accumulate positive karma and eventually lead one to enlightenment. Enlightenment is the consideration that overrides all others. This notion is implicit in the concept *zen'aku funi* 善悪不二 ("non-duality of good and evil") which means that there is no distinction between right and wrong. A radical example of this idea is seen in *Sannin hōshi*, in which a murderer is led to religious awakening as a consequence of murdering a young woman. In light of the religious end achieved, the murder actually is given a positive interpretation. The victim is considered to have been an incarnation of Amida and given credit for inspiring the murderer's religious awakening.

The Christian concept of sin as something to be forgiven is inapplicable to Mahāyāna Buddhism in another way. In comprehending emptiness (*kū*), the distinction between right and wrong becomes pointless. The meaning of emptiness is that nothing has an individual existence, that things have no self (Skt. *ātman*); they are a temporary collection of parts. One therefore ceases to make a distinction between oneself and others. As a result, "clinging and acquisitiveness" are put to an end and "harmony" between the individual and his environment is established (Matsunaga 1972, pp. 54-55). The very sources of wrongdoing are annihilated. Once such comprehension has been achieved wrongdoing is said to be extinguished (*metsu* 滅) because when one is in this state wrongdoing has become metaphysically impossible.

One source which clarifies the orthodox Mahāyāna meaning of *zange* is the *Bussetsu kan Fugen bosatsu gyōhō kyō* (Sutra spoken by the Buddha on the rites of meditation on the bodhisattva Fugen) (de Visser 1935, p. 264). This sutra outlines the *Sange rokkon kan Fugen hō* 懺悔六根観普賢法, or Rite of repenting the perceptions of the six senses through meditation of Fugen, where "repenting," as indicated above, means reconsideration in consequence of dissatisfaction with results. It teaches that the six faculties, of seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking, feeling, and thinking, are the source of wrongdoing. Sense perceptions, words, and thoughts, are so many obstacles to enlightenment. For example, by the sense of hearing random sounds disrupt one's tranquility, and by the faculty of thought one's mind constantly wanders, preventing peacefulness. Therefore, readers are advised to read Mahāyāna texts, to consider the ultimate truth (*daiichigi* 第一義), to meditate on emptiness (*hōkū* 法空) and nothingness (*musō* 無相), to think about the meaning of nirvana (*shinjaku* 真寂), etc. The *gāthā* which summarizes this section of the sutra concludes:

> All negative karma arises out of illusion,
> If you would repent, seat yourself properly and contemplate
> True Reality (*jissō* 実相).
> Wrongdoing (*zai*) is nullified through wisdom, as frost and dew
> vanish in the sunlight (T. 9, 393b10-12).

To "repent" the six faculties, then, means to realize that what one perceives through the senses is illusory and that the senses are hindrances to enlightenment. Similarly in medieval Japanese revelatory tales, the realization that emotional attachments are due to illusion and obstruct enlightenment is implicit in accounts of past loves.

False Leads in the Literary History of "Zange Monogatari"

In search of religio-literary conventions Japanese literary scholars have tried to trace the concept of *zange* back to some of the earliest extant secular works such as the eighth-century poetry anthology, the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), and *Taketori monogatari* 竹取物語, a tenth-century fictional tale. They fail to note, however, the meaning of *zange* in the sutras. The traces they claim to find seem forced in the extreme, and the texts they cite are largely irrelevant to the development of medieval *zange monogatari*. Hatano Takekuni, for example, interprets *zange* as "confession" in the sense of "revealing" or "making public," an interpretation offered, as we have seen, by Takahashi as well. Hatano suggests that two poems in the *Man'yōshū*, in which travelers reveal their lovers' names to a roadside god, are forerunners of the development in Japanese secular literature of the practice of ascetic, itinerant monks and nuns telling revelatory tales. He cites the following poems (Hatano 1947, p. 45):

In awe of the god of Mount Ashigara
I spoke of the love
That had been hidden behind the evening clouds.

Ashigara no
Misaka kashikomi
Kumoriyo no
A ga shitabae o
Kochide tsuru ka mo.
(*Man'yōshū* No.3371; Takagi 1960, vol. 6, p. 415)

Reverently,
As an offering on my way to Koshi,
I spoke the name of my lover,
Which had not been spoken before.

Kashikomito
Norazu arishi o
Mikoshiji no
Tamuke ni tachite
Imo ga na noritsu.
(*Man'yōshū* No.3730; Takagi 1960, vol. 7, p. 97)

These poems reflect the interesting practice of treating information that has been kept secret as something valuable which can be presented as an offering to Shinto deities. However, this act of revealing secrets to a deity is hardly relevant to the practice of *zange* as it occurs in late-medieval revelatory tales. Hatano does not offer specific examples of *zange* by monks or nuns that date from the span of the five hundred years between these *Man'yōshū* poems and episodes in the war epic *Heike monogatari* 平家物語, where such *zange* can be found. As a result the link between the *Man'yōshū* poems and late medieval revelatory tales is tenuous, if indeed there is one at all.

Hatano also mentions several examples of passages in pre-medieval literary works where personal experiences are shared among members of a small group and which he considers to have influenced the development of late medieval revelatory tales. One in the eleventh-century *Genji monogatari* 原氏物語 consists of the lengthy conversation on women in which the characters Genji, Tō no Chūjō, an officer of the guards, and a young official from the Ministry of Rites, take part on a quiet rainy night (Seidensticker 1976, pp. 21-38). After some generalizations about the advantages and disadvantages of various types of women, the officer of the guards and the Ministry of Rites official tell of mistakes they have made in the way they handled certain love affairs. The two men share their experiences by way of advice to the younger Genji and Tō no Chūjō. There are no religious implications in this passage.

Such accounts can be considered *zange* only insofar as the word *zange* was also used—as the word confession can be used in English—in a purely secular situation in which one makes public certain facts that had previously been private. This meaning of the word is reflected in an anecdote related in the *setsuwa* 説話 collection *Kokon chomon jū* 古今著聞集of 1254, in which a man tells a story about taking a woman's robe as a memento of a night of love and finding out later that the robe actually belonged to another lover. The man refuses to reveal the name of the other suitor until his audience complains that unless he does, he has not shown a sincere intention to confess (*zange no hon'i sen nashi* 懺悔の本意せんなし). He then admits that the robe had belonged to Emperor Goshirakawa (Arikawa 1954, p. 112; Nagazumi 1966, pp. 254-55).

An entry in *Sanetaka kōki* 実隆公記, the diary of Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455-1537), mentions the practice of *zange* after banquets, and how much everyone enjoyed it. *Zange* in this context seems to have referred to conversations in which everyone told of some personal, past experience, which was embarrassing, amusing, or even a bit risqué as in the case of the man mentioned above in the *Kokon chomon jū* (Arikawa 1954, p. 112). In the secular context as well as the religious, *zange* meant "revelation." However, we do not see in after-dinner entertainment *zange*, any element of realization or self-revelation, which is fundamental to the religious *sange* rituals described in the sutras and in medieval revelatory tales.

In a unique effort to identify the roots of revelatory tales in earlier Japanese literature, Sekine Kenji notes occurrences of what he calls *zange* in *Taketori monogatari* and *Genji monogatari*, both of which works he refers to as *ichidai ki* 一代記 , or "accounts of the lives of fictional heroes or heroines." He points to the contemporary view that one is born human as punishment for transgressions committed in a previous life.[4] On this basis he interprets *Taketori monogatari* as the story of a woman whose wrongdoing in her life on the moon, that is, in an earlier existence (although it is never described in the tale itself), caused her to be exiled on earth. Sekine also cites from *Genji monogatari* Genji's comment to the effect that he realizes that his exile to Suma was due to his transgressions in another life (Sekine 1974, p. 55; Seidensticker 1976, p. 233). Sekine's general argument is that to express an understanding that suffering in one lifetime is retribution for transgressions committed in another, can be considered a kind of *zange* or confession. However, fictional accounts of the lives of heroes or heroines with previous-life transgressions cannot, I believe, be seen as direct forerunners of late medieval revelatory tales because the former describe *present* sufferings, understood as *retribution* for past-life transgressions and are illustrative of the workings of karma. Revelatory tales, on the other hand, describe *past* sufferings in this life as having been *caused* by illusion and are illustrative of the superability of illusion and the possibility of enlightenment.

Arikawa Mikao presents the most thorough list of examples of the *zange* motif in Japanese literature (Arikawa 1954, pp. 97-101). He cites an anecdote in the *Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記 , an early *setsuwa* collection, in which an ox tells a monk that as punishment for having stolen ten sheaves of rice in its previous life as a man, it has been reborn into its present form (Nakamura 1973, pp. 120-21). Again, this follows the same line of thought as found in Sekine; "confessions" of transgressions once committed, where a present condition is retribution for a past wrongdoing, are clearly *zange* of a sort fundamentally different from that found in medieval revelatory tales.

Several *setsuwa* accounts in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 also depict the recounting of specific violations of Buddhist precepts, such as the transgression of taking life. In one anecdote a hunter listens to a sermon, realizes that he has transgressed in taking the lives of countless animals, and fears the karmic effect of his wrongdoing. To counterbalance the resultant negative karma he has accumulated, he decides to build a temple which will benefit both him and the spirits of the creatures he has killed (Yamada 1959, vol. 25, p. 69). In this account the hunter had been ignorant of, or at least oblivious to, the doctrine that taking life is wrong. Newly aware that his own salvation is at stake, he reforms. Inasmuch as the acknowledgement of a religious truth is involved, this may be considered *zange*. It differs from that in revelatory tales, however, because the hunter's problem concerns a specific transgression rather than illusion which constitutes a more profound religious concept.

The story of Minamoto no Tametomo's (1139-70) "confession" and suicide as told in the early Kamakura period war tale *Hōgen monogatari* 保元物語 is a similar case. Tametomo reviews his whole life and admits that, although it was his duty to kill since he was a warrior, it is unfortunate for him to have slain so many men in battle. On the verge of suicide, having fulfilled his military duties, he considers what effect his actions in this life will have on his future existences. He acknowledges the Buddhist belief in causality and transmigration: "I am well aware that . . . for my evil conduct in this life the result will be suffering in the next" (Wilson 1971, pp. 105-6). Like the anecdote about the hunter in the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, this episode involving Tametomo, although described as including *zange*, is not significantly relevant to the development of late-medieval revelatory tales.

Another use of the word *zange* is found in *Ōkagami* 大鏡 , a history of Japan covering the years A.D. 850-1025, and written about 1100 in which the two principal narrators are men close to two hundred years old. One of them, Shigeki, announces that he has a "confession" to make:

> The events I witnessed during Emperor Daigo's reign will never lose their luster. Listen, everyone! I feel self-conscious about talking this way here [in a temple], but I am afraid I still haven't overcome my youthful sin (*zai* 罪) of thrilling to the splendor of worldly things. I want to make my confession (*zange*) today in this temple (McCullough 1980, p. 218; Matsumura 1960, p. 255).

He recounts the events that interested him and that thereby, to his embarrassment, represent the worldly attachments which keep him in illusion, such as the marvelous sight of the Emperor's falcon returning from the hunt at sunset, clutching its prey. The interesting aspect of this revelation, which is an enraptured description of worldly matters he has enjoyed witnessing, is that Shigeki, fully aware that such attachments obstruct his enlightenment, has not overcome them.

We see in these so-called precedents to late-medieval revelatory tales no more than the public expression of attachments or transgressions implicit in the religious beliefs of the time: *zange* as revelation to others. "Confession" is an adequate translation for the kind of *zange* incidents cited above. Such passages, however, fall far short of comprising what Hatano calls a "tradition of revelatory literature" (*zange bungaku no dentō* 懺悔文学の伝統). In the revelation of lovers' names in the poems from the *Man'yōshū* as an offering to Shinto gods, *zange* as the recognition of a religious truth is completely lacking. The recognition that present suffering is retribution for past deeds, the concept Sekine identified as *zange* in *Taketori monogatari* and *Genji monogatari*, is quite different from the realization that this world is an illusion, which is the main thrust of the *zange* in revelatory tales. The former concept reflects no more than an understanding of the doctrine of karma, while the latter implies a theological existentialism. The *setsuwa* accounts in the *Nihon ryōiki* and the *Konjaku monogatari* and the Tametomo episode in the *Hōgen monogatari* refer only to karmic retribution. Shigeki in the *Ōkagami* thinks of worldly attachments as an excess typical of youth; he is far from a realization that his rose-colored view of the world is an illusion.

The rainy-night scene in *Genji monogatari* is a relevant precedent only in setting—several people sharing narratives of past experiences. The same custom is seen in *Ōkagami* as a whole, and in the *Kokon chomon jū* and *Sanetaka kōki*. In these cases, however, the objective is merely to pass the time. Genji and his friends needed to keep awake the whole night because of a taboo. They were threatened by supernatural powers which were periodically dangerous (Morris 1969, p. 140). It was a common social custom to while away long nights in group activities such as storytelling and joint composition of linked verse (Ruch 1965, p. 17). In *Ōkagami*, Shigeki and his colleague, Yotsugi, reminisce during the time they and their audience are waiting for a sermon to begin: "Time passed while we waited for the preacher. We were all feeling bored when old Yotsugi spoke up again: 'Well, since there is nothing else to do, what do you say? Shall I give you a story about the old days to let these people know what things were like?' " (McCullough 1980, p. 67).

In revelatory tales, however, the objective of the sharing of stories is explicitly religious. In *Shichinin bikuni*, the stories of self-revelations are told upon request. One nun decided to ask the others about "cultivating enlightenment." Her invitation that they share the accounts of their religious awakenings so they might "console" themselves on a "long, dark, autumn night," is a metaphorical suggestion that they seek to look again at the light of religious truth that awakened them from their illusions in the long night of human life. In *Sannin hōshi* a monk proposes: "Let us all tell of our self-revelations. It is said to extinguish your karmic burden; there's no reason to hold back" (Ichiko 1958, p. 434). We may conclude that revelation, verbalizing one's attachments, helps to distance one from them, imparts an understanding of the religious truth that all is illusion, and is part of the process of deepening that understanding. Revelations, then, should be made any number of times. This point is, in fact, implicit in revelatory tales.

Conclusion

We have seen now, in this review of the various uses of the term *zange*, three basic types of *zange*. One type is the simple sharing of entertaining stories, especially those which are amusingly embarrassing for the teller to confess. A second sort of *zange* is the admission of specific past transgressions that are the cause of present suffering and negative karma. The third is an awakening in one's heart to the idea that actions and attachments in one's past had kept one in state of illusion and the public revealing of the fact of that awakening. This third type of *zange* is essentially equivalent to *sange,* the technically religious meditative practice of recognizing that what we perceive through our senses (including thinking and feeling) hinder enlightenment.

Revelatory tales in which characters make a kind of statement of faith by describing the sorrows that result from ignorance and illusion, are not the flowering of a long, latent, secular tradition, as Japanese scholars to date have suggested. Instead, they are a significantly new phenomenon in Japanese literature. As the self-consciously public description of a profound self-revelation, revelatory tales are the secular literary manifestation of the concept of *sange* as found in Buddhist scripture and appear for the first time during the medieval period. Thus, a religious ritual inspired the creation of a new literary genre.

NOTES

1. *Renga* 連歌 is an example of the Buddhist concept of *mujō* shaping literary form. The constant changes of meaning from verse to verse in *renga* are meant to mirror the transience of all things.

2. Popular medieval literature stresses transience as the most basic premise of Buddhism, perhaps because it is simpler to grasp than the more difficult, philosophical concept of *kū* 空 ("emptiness").

3. "T." refers to *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大蔵経 [The Chinese Buddhist canon compiled in the Taishō era]. Takakusu Junjirō et al., eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924-1934.

4. Being human is one of the six conditions (*rokudō* 六道) of sentient beings. Karma determines the condition into which one is born.

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