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THE BACKGROUND OF THE LEGEND OF THE “FEATHER ROBE PINE” OF THE TOYO RIVER, AICHI PREFECTURE, JAPAN

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Abstract

This study examines the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” of the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, with the aim of clarifying the background of its formation and the characteristics of its transmission. Based on the archival analysis, the following insights were derived. As a result, four points were clarified. First, the background of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend preserved of the Toyo River is believed to have involved the prayers of the people in Toyo River basin for flood control. Second, a connection can be recognized between the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” of the Toyo River and the Hoshino clan, whose influence extended into the Toyokawa River basin during the Muromachi period, held the position of “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” in the Daijosai ceremony. Third, the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River is connected to the story of the noblewoman and the “Single Leaf Tea Garden” preserved in Gyomei-cho. Fourth, the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River is considered to have been intricately constructed under the influence of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of Miho no Matsubara.

Keywords: Feather Robe Pine; Toyo River; Hoshino Clan; Daijosai Ceremony; Single Leaf Tea Garden

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INTRODUCTION: THE LEGEND OF THE “FEATHER ROBE PINE” OF THE TOYO RIVER, AICHI PREFECTURE, JAPAN

There is a monument of the “Feather Robe Pine Tree” (Photo 1) on the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture, Japan. There is a legend about this “Feather Robe Pine.”

Once upon a time, a fisherman named Gyomei lived in Ushikubo-cho, Toyokawa City, Aichi Prefecture. One day, while fishing and wandering around Senbonyanagiwara, he saw a beautiful, thin robe hanging from a pine tree. He immediately picked it up and went home, where he quietly placed it away in a stone chest. That night, a beautiful woman visited Gyomei and asked him to return it, saying that it was a feather robe and that it was of no use to humans.

When Gyomei refused to return it, she reluctantly became his wife and they had a child together. When the child turned three, he took out the feather robe and placed it on the floor, thinking that it would be acceptable, but Gyomei’s wife immediately put it on and ascended to heaven. Subsequently, one-leaf tea plants grew around the house, and when they brewed the tea and gave it to the child, the child grew healthy. It is said that this is a keepsake of the heavenly maiden (Yoshio Hotta, “Legends of the Tokai,” *Daiichi Hoki*, 1973, pp. 44–45).

The second half of this legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” has been altered. The celestial maiden gave tea seeds to her child, whom she was leaving behind in the mortal world, saying, “After I am gone, think of you as having a single parent, and I am sending this to you.” However, the tea leaves planted by the maiden only grew on one side, so the villagers called it the “One-Leaf Tea Tree.” As the celestial maiden flew off to heaven, she left behind the words, “I will become a firefly and come to you every night.” Thus, whenever local people saw a large firefly, they called it the “Gyomenji Firefly” and showed their respect. The doll that the celestial maiden is said to have made for her beloved child remains.

This study focuses on the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” that remains in Toyokawa City, aiming to clarify the characteristics of this legend and the background in which it was established. The following studies discuss the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine.” Ando (1986) focuses on the Hoshino clan, which expanded its influence to the Toyo River and its surrounding areas from the late Heian period (1086–1192) through the Kamakura period (late 12th century–1333) to the Yoshino period (1336–1392), revealing that they held the role of the “Heavenly Feather Robe.” Nishijima (2007) examines the Muromachi-period “*Daijōsai*” (Imperial Coming-of-Age Ceremony) and clarifies the role the Hoshino clan played as the “Heavenly Feather Robe.” Kobayashi (2011) argues that the Hoshino clan’s involvement with the “Heavenly Feather Robe” is connected to the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine Tree.” Hayashi (2018) discusses celestial maiden legends associated with the Hoshino clan and their relationship with the dolls preserved in the region. However, all of these studies focus primarily on the role of the Hoshino clan, who served as the “Feather Robe Pine,” and do not specifically clarify the historical background behind the formation of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend.

Therefore, this study examines the background of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend as it has been passed down in Toyokawa City, Aichi Prefecture, through historical document research. By doing so, it clarifies the context of the “Heavenly Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture, contributing to a broader understanding of Japanese “Celestial Maiden Legends.” Furthermore, this study is expected to inform wider discussions in regional folklore and environmental history related to Japanese “Celestial Maiden Legends.”



Photo 1: "Feather Robe Pine Tree" of the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture.

PRAYERS AND WISHES FOR FLOOD CONTROL FROM THE PEOPLE OF THE TOYO RIVER BASIN

First, the legend of the "Feather Robe Pine" of the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture first appeared in the Mikawa Province Famous Places Illustrated Guide (1851) at the end of the Edo period. This document was compiled by Natsume (1851), a hardware merchant in Kamidenma-cho, Toyohashi. He conducted research from 1844 onwards with Hisada Toko as his assistant, which included numerous illustrations drawn by Yoshida's painters such as Onda Sekiho. The authenticity of this document is supported by the fact that the eight volumes covering the Higashi-Mikawa region contain a preface dating back to 1851, suggesting that it was created at the end of the Edo period.

The "Feather Robe Pine" in this document is depicted in the illustration below (Photo 2).

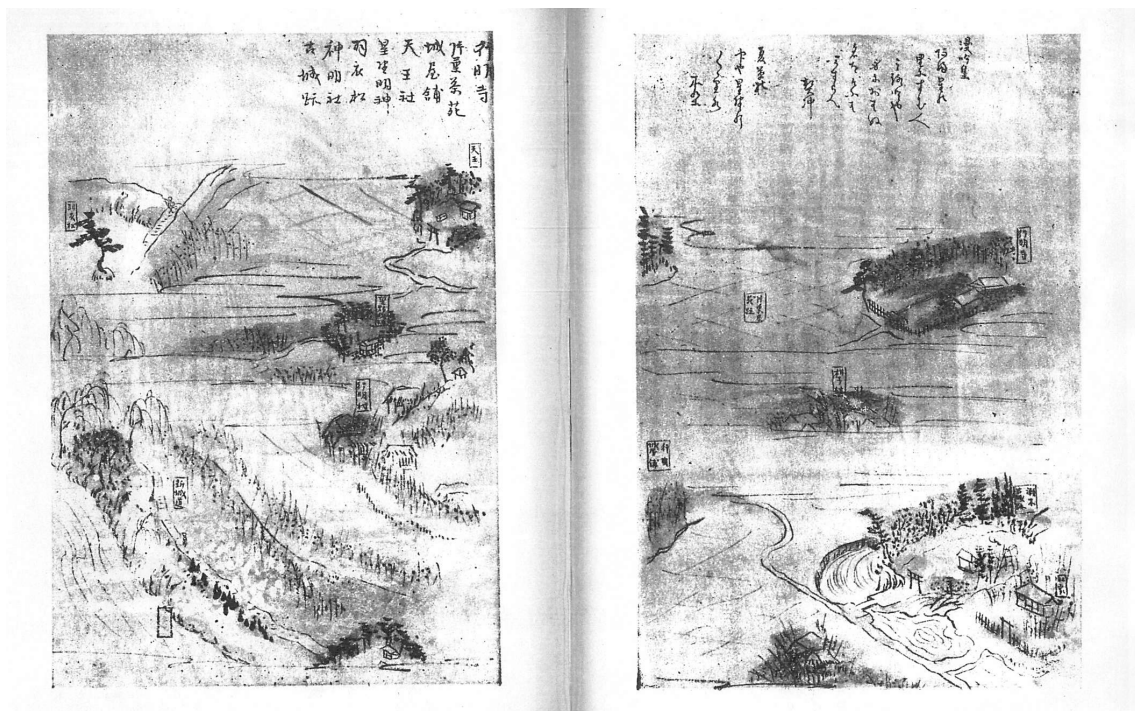


Photo 2: Location of “Feather Robe Pine” at the end of the Edo period: Natsume (1851) “Famous Places of Mikawa Province,” pp. 322–323.

As seen from this illustration, this document is a valuable source of evidence that the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” existed at the end of the Edo period. The location is described as being “to the right of the Shinjo Highway”; it is clear that by the end of the Edo period, the “Feather Robe Pine” was already recognized as a legendary scenic spot in the Toyokawa area.

The “Feather Robe Pine” monument currently stands at the site of a diversion weir between the Toyo River and Toyo River Floodway (Photo 3).



Photo 3: Current location of the “Feather Robe Pine.”:
<https://www.cbr.mlit.go.jp/toyohashi/housuiro50/>

In the Toyokawa River basin, floods have frequently occurred in the past, causing hardship for the local population. This is because the river’s relatively short length (approximately 77 km), with two-thirds of it flowing through mountainous areas with high rainfall. Consequently, runoff from the upper reaches reaches the plains in just three to four hours. Furthermore, the river meanders in its lower reaches, and the narrow U-shaped sections lack sufficient drainage capacity to handle half of the maximum flow rate. Kasumitei (Yoroizutsumi) was constructed as a flood control measure during the Edo period; however, even in the Showa era, major floods were recorded in 1935, 1937, and 1944, making the construction of a floodway an urgent necessity.

Construction officially began in 1943; however, little progress was made because of the expansion of the war. It was not until after the war (1953 onwards) that the project finally got on track. In 1965, the Toyo River floodway (a 6.6 km long channel connecting Gyomei-cho and Koji-cho in the Toyokawa City to Maeshiba-cho in Toyohashi City), which had been the long-cherished dream of people living in the low-lying areas of the lower Toyo River, was completed. During floods, people in areas such as the Toko, Gejo, and Omura districts, which are prone to flooding and serve as retention areas, were freed from years of suffering from floods.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the “Feather Robe Pine,” depicted in the late Edo period, still remains today alongside a monument near the diversion weir of the Toyo River floodway control channel. In other words, the “Feather Robe Pine” was passed down by people living in the Toyo River basin as a symbolic entity that survived the floods. From this, it becomes clear that the “Feather Robe Pine” has been depicted and preserved as a symbol of the prayers of the people living in the Toyo River basin for flood control.

DAIJOSAI CEREMONY IN THE MUROMACHI PERIOD AND THE HOSHINO CLAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE “ROLE OF THE HEAVENLY FEATHER ROBE”

Second, a connection can be recognized between the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” of the Toyo River and the Hoshino clan, whose influence extended into the Toyokawa River basin during the Muromachi period, held the position of “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” in the Daijosai ceremony. During this era, the Hoshino clan was appointed to the “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe”—responsible for presenting the heavenly robes used in the Daijosai ceremony to the Imperial Household. Daijosai ceremony is a crucial ritual performed by Japanese Emperors upon succession to the throne. It involves a newly enthroned Emperor offering newly harvested grains from the provinces to the gods, praying for abundant harvests and the peace and prosperity of the nation and its people. A “Heavenly Feather Robe” (Photo 3) was used for this ceremony. During the Daijosai ceremony, the Emperor would descend into a bathtub wearing the “Heavenly Feather Robe,” then remove and discard it within the tub before ascending. Thus, the “Heavenly Feather Robe” held profound significance in the deification of the Emperor.

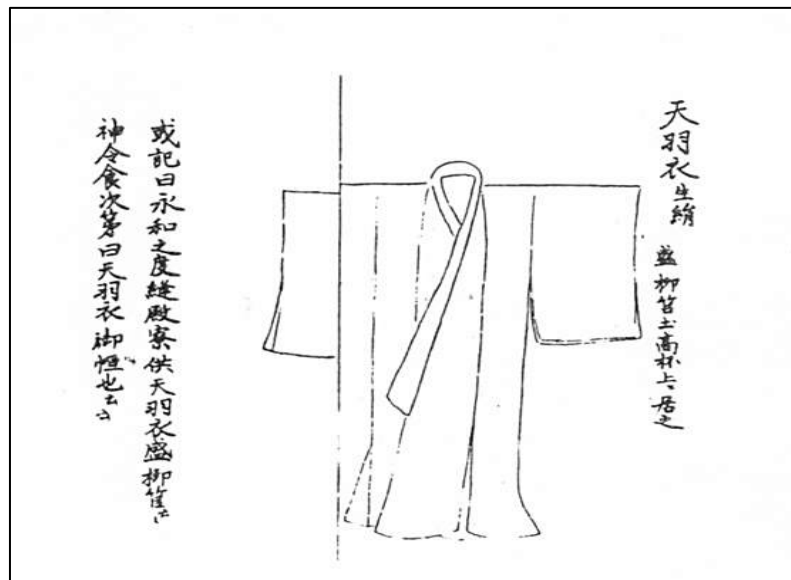


Photo 4: The “Heavenly Feather Robe” used in the Daijosai ceremony, included in “Accession to the Imperial Throne, Daijosai ceremony, Data Collection”

Sericulture has flourished in the Toyokawa River basin since ancient times, making it a major silk-producing region. Furthermore, the Hoshino clan achieved the position of Grand Shrine Priest during the Muromachi period by personally ingratiating themselves with shoguns such as Ashikaga Takauji, Yoshimasa, and Yoshihisa. Consequently, it is documented that the Hoshino clan performed the “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” during the Daijosai ceremonies of 1415 and 1430 in the Muromachi period (Nishijima, 2007, p. 15).

However, after Shogun Yoshihisa’s death in 1495, the Hoshino clan gradually lost its economic foundation and political standing, fading from historical records. During this period, the need arose to honor the Hoshino clan’s involvement in the “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” during the Muromachi period. Therefore, it is thought that Hoshino clan’s historical achievement of performing the “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” became associated with the “Heavenly Feather Robe,” a symbol of deification, and was passed down in local legends.

THE STORY OF THE NOBLEWOMAN AND THE “SINGLE LEAF TEA GARDEN”

Third, a connection exists between the Toyo River’s “Feather Robe Pine” legend and the story of the noblewoman and the “Single Leaf Tea Garden” preserved in Toyokawa City, Gyomei-cho. Although it was a “tea tree,” it was a precious commodity at the time. This is because the tea ceremony was either a pastime for the nobility or used for medicinal purposes. Regarding the origin of the “tea plant” that existed in Toyokawa City, Gyomei-cho, the following record remains:

During the Kamakura period, three generations of the Hoshino lineage—Tadayoshi, Yasunari, and Nagayoshi—ascended to the Imperial court and maintained connections with the nobility. A noblewoman married to the Hoshino family came to live in Gyomei-cho and gave birth to a son. For celebration, a doll was presented as a gift. At that time, dolls were precious gifts, and this doll is said to be the one still preserved by the Hirao family, believed to be descendants of Gyomei Hoshino, and known as the “Feather Robe Doll” (Photo 5).



Photo 5: “Feather Robe Doll” remaining in Gyomei-cho, Toyokawa City

It is likely that this noblewoman planted the “tea tree” and began cultivating tea. Regarding the origin of the “tea tree” that once stood in Gyomei-cho, Toyokawa City, the following record remains:

Single Leaf Tea Garden

There is said to have been a single tea tree in the tomb of the wife of the Hoshino clan, known as “Single Leaf Tea Garden.” It was once called the “Single Leaf Tea Garden”; however, it appears to have withered over time. A monument records that a beautiful woman came to the riverside of the village to wash her clothes. When a local man saw her, he took advantage of the moment when she had hung her feather robe on a nearby pine tree. The man took the robe and returned home, and when the beautiful woman returned, she told him that she would become his wife. The couple lived together happily, and the woman later gave birth to a son. When the son grew up, his mother secretly asked him where the feather robe was hidden. He put on the robe and left behind a tea bowl as an offering in response to his mother’s prayers. According to the monument, this tea naturally became single-leaf tea. The story appears to reflect themes similar to those found in the Miho’s legends.

(From : Natsume (1851), “Famous Places of Mikawa Province,” Volume, Miscellaneous Section, Hoi District, Atsumi County, Aichi Prefectural Education Association, Aichi Prefecture, p. 324)

Thus, the “Single Leaf Tea Garden” is said to have stood alone within the burial grounds of Lord Hoshino’s wife. It is said that the noblewoman, unable to endure living in the countryside as a local clan leader, left behind her beloved seven-year-old child and secretly disappeared while still dressed in her wedding attire. The “tea tree” she left behind naturally grew into a single leaf tea plant, giving rise to the name “Single Leaf Tea Garden” (Ando, 1986, p. 61).

Therefore, it is thought that the story of this noblewoman and the “Single Leaf Tea Garden,” interpreted as celestial maiden legend, came to symbolize the authority of the Hoshino clan and supported the continuation of their rule. Furthermore, the coexistence of this legend with the story of the noblewoman and the “Single Leaf Tea Garden” is a distinctive characteristic of the Toyo River’s “Feather Robe Pine” tradition.

CONFUSION WITH THE LEGEND OF THE “FEATHER ROBE PINE” IN MIHO NO MATSUBARA, SHIMIZU CITY, SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE

Fourth, the legend of the “Feathered Robe Pine” of the Toyo River is a composite narrative influenced by the legend of the “Feathered Robe Pine” at Miho no Matsubara. Approximately 128 kilometers east of the monument to Toyokawa’s “Feathered Robe Pine,” in Miho no Matsubara, Shimizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, the legend of the “Feathered Robe Pine” also survives. This is described as follows:

Feather Robe Pine (Miho, Shimizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture)

Miho no Matsubara is home to a shrine called the Miho Shrine. A piece of the heavenly maiden’s feathered robe is preserved as a sacred treasure. The pine is known for its beautiful branches.

Long ago, on his way back from fishing, a fisherman named Hakuryu heard an indescribably beautiful sound from beyond the clouds. He then sensed a mysterious and alluring fragrance. Suddenly, he saw an unfamiliar thin silk garment hanging from a pine tree.

He picked it up, was awestruck by its beauty, and wanted to take it home as a treasure. The heavenly maiden then appeared and asked him to return her robe, but Hakuryu refused. The heavenly maiden wept and pleaded for the return of the robe. However, she was taken to Hakuryu’s house and eventually became his wife.

Thus, she became the wife of a humble fisherman and even had a child with him. However, one day, she happened to find the place where the robe was hidden, put it on, immediately forgot about her husband Hakuryu and their beloved child, and returned to heaven. Miho Shrine worships the heavenly maiden as a deity.

(Hotta Yoshio, 1973; “Legends of the Tokai,” Daiichi Hoki, Tokyo, pp. 43–44)

Thus, the legends share several points of convergence: the robe hanging on a pine tree, the man taking the feather robe home, the couple marrying and having a son, and the woman reclaiming the feather robe. The narrative pattern in which the heavenly maiden retrieves the feather robe, abandons her husband, and returns to heaven is classified as the “ascension type.” Regarding which legend emerged first, the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of Miho no Matsubara is believed to be the older tradition. The “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River was influenced by the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of Miho no Matsubara in Shimizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture.

Furthermore, a common element shared by both regions is their association with “water” – specifically, coastal or riverside locations. The Miho no Matsubara legend is set by the sea, reflecting the Xian (immortal) belief that the seashore served as a fitting gateway to the divine realm (Ueta, 2023). In ethnology, the significance of the custom of drawing young water—typically performed during New Year’s or Tanabata—is interpreted as symbolizing the renewal of life and rejuvenation, given its association with the power of “water” (Obayashi, 1992). The legend of the

“Feathered Robe Pine” in Toyokawa City being set along a river may reflect prayers for the prosperity of the clan, such as the birth of a child by the riverbank, as seen in Japanese mythology.

Therefore, it becomes clear that the “Feathered Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River was composite in nature, influenced by the legend of Miho no Matsubara’s tradition and structured as riverbank narrative expressing wishes for the prosperity of the Hoshino clan.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” preserved of the Toyo River, Aichi Prefecture, Japan and to clarify the characteristics of this legend and the historical context of its origin. As a result of this research, four points were clarified.

First, the background of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend preserved of the Toyo River is believed to have involved the prayers of the people in Toyo River basin for flood control.

Second, a connection can be recognized between the legend of the “Feather Robe Pine” of the Toyo River and the Hoshino clan, whose influence extended into the Toyokawa River basin during the Muromachi period, held the position of “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” in the Daijosai ceremony.

Third, the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River is connected to the story of the noblewoman and the “Single Leaf Tea Garden” preserved in Gyomei-cho.

Fourth, the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River is considered to have been intricately constructed under the influence of the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of Miho no Matsubara.

In summary, by using the “Feather Robe Pine” legend of the Toyo River as a case study, this study has clarified how river-centered flood control in Japan helped shape regional identity and symbolized the historical achievement of the Hoshino clan’s “Role of the Heavenly Feather Robe” thereby contributing to its collective recognition.

Future research should compare the characteristics and historical contexts of the “Feather Robe” legends (Photo 6) preserved across Japan, which could serve as subjects for future study.

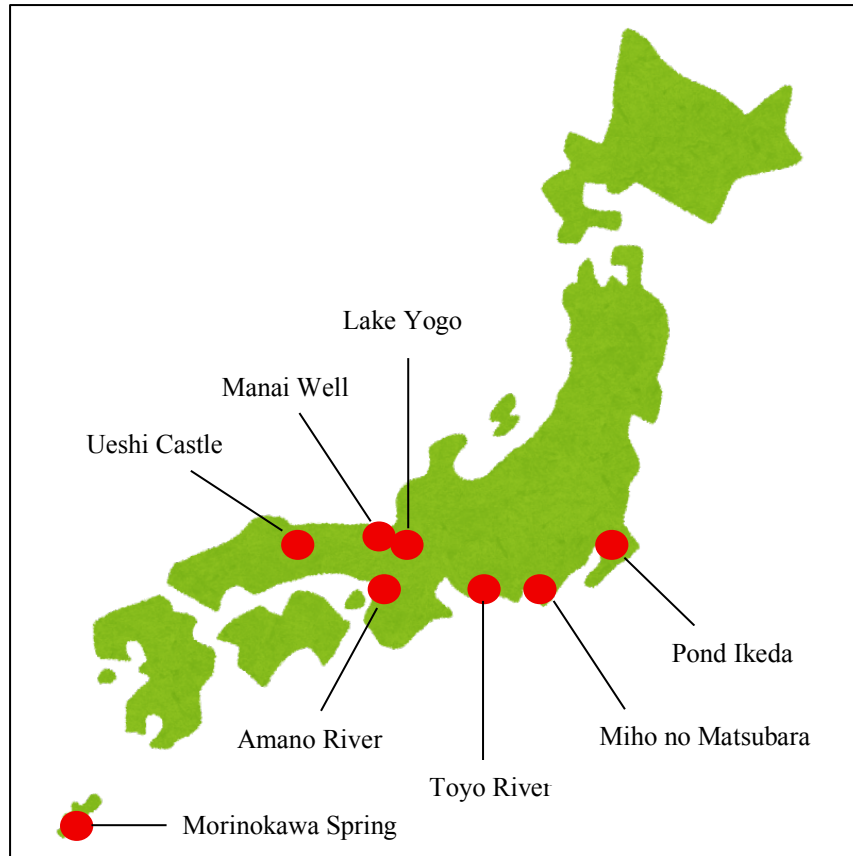


Photo 6: Distribution Map of the “Feather Robe” Legend in Japan

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