



ŠĀH-NĀMA TRANSLATIONS XV. INTO JAPANESE

After ‘Omar Kayyām, whose *Robā‘iyāt* was introduced to Japanese readers around the turn of the 20th Century, Ferdowsi was the first Persian poet to attract the attention of Japanese writers and authors, who translated selections of his *Šāh-nāma*, first and mostly the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrāb, into Japanese. Adventures and fates of the heroes of *Šāh-nāma* appeals to the Japanese, who find in them a close similarity to the ill-fated heroes in their own mythology and history.

In both fables and narratives, the Japanese are more interested in and attracted to adventures and fates of heroes, historical ties with other nations, amazing events, similarities between myths and tales of other cultures and their own and their reflection in literary works. The *Šāh-nāma* is rich in all these elements and relates the adventurous exploits and sacrifices of heroes in fascinating stories. The Japanese specially sympathize with fallen heroes in the *Šāh-nāma* (e.g., Sohrāb), whose fate and tragic end remind them of some touching scenes of their own history, of which some typical examples are found in the *Heike monogatari* (Tales of Heike), whose stories were recited with the accompaniment of harp (Jap. *biwa*) in gatherings (performances called *Heike-biwa*) in the same way as the narratives of the *Šāh-nāma* are used in the Persian tradition of *naqqāli* (professional storytelling).

The *Šāh-nāma* was introduced to the literary world of Japan in 1916 with the



publication of an abridged translation, titled *Perushiya shinwa* (Legends of Persia), by Bunmei Tsuchiya (1891-1990; [FIGURE 1](#)), himself a poet known for the beauty of his poetic expressions. This book was a collection of some stories of the *Šāh-nāma* rendered into Japanese from James Atkinson's English translation, as well as translations of a part of the *Vendidad* of the Avesta, all compiled in a wonderfully elaborate large format of more than 500 pages decorated with paintings that illustrated certain scenes in the stories ([FIGURE 2](#)). In his preface to the translation, Tsuchiya wrote: "What we Japanese appreciate and admire in myths and legends of the *Šāh-nāma* is their similarity to historical tales of Japan. The tale in the opening chapter of the *Šāh-nāma* resembles a Chinese fable well known and praised in Japanese literature, from among the legends and history contained in the *Records of the Sankō-gotei* ("three kings and five emperors"). The lives of many heroes of the *Šāh-nāma* are adventures of war and love. The story of Rostam and Sohrāb should be considered the masterpiece of this epic work, and the tragic end of Sohrāb, who is killed by his own father, is the climax of this entire episode."

Tsuchiya's translation was followed by *Perushiya no densetsu to rekishi* (Legends and history of Persia) of Akijirō Soma (Tokyo, 1922), which was the annotated Japanese version of an abridged English translation of the *Šāh-nāma* by the American author Benjamin. This work was introduced to Japanese readers at a time when nationalistic sentiments were on the rise, and the epic spirit of the heroic exploits in the *Šāh-nāma* would suit the political milieu of those turbulent years that eventually led to the crucial events of 1930s. In his preface to the work, Soma concluded that, in their efforts to distinguish themselves in the Asian continent as a nation with a sense of justice and humanistic values, the Japanese had many things to learn from ancient Persians.

In 1941 Masaharu Higuchi published a new translation of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb, based on a French version. He used an epical tone that was called for at a time when Japan was fiercely engaged in the Pacific War, and adjusted the story for a Japanese Kabuki play. Higuchi's translation, rendered in a magnificent and resonant style and printed on Japanese hand-made paper (*washi*), is so fluent and elegant that the play would attract a sizable audience if staged even nowadays ([FIGURE 3](#)). Higuchi was a pioneer pilot and the first Japanese pilot to fly over China a warplane designed and crafted by Japan, thereby distinguishing himself as a national hero. He later became the military attaché at the Japanese Embassy in Paris, where he developed his literary



skills and became fascinated by Persian literature.

In his introduction to Higuchi's work, Saboru Nagafuji likened Sohrāb's taking leave from Tahmina to a scene of a warplane (*kamikaze*) pilot bidding farewell to his mother before leaving for a suicide attack. Nagafuji referred also to the similarity between stories of the *Šāh-nāma* and Japanese Kabuki plays, naming some famous plays such as *Ichinotabi futaba gunki* as examples. Nagafuji reminds the reader that values cherished by the Samurai, such as *ninjō* (affection and tenderness) and *giri* (zeal, mettle; duties to one's lord, family or one's name), find abundant reflections in the *Šāh-nāma*. He further pointed out that the *Šāh-nāma* generates in the reader the same feeling as works of Chikamatsu and Mokuami (famous *kabuki* playwrights) do. He concluded his introduction by stating that the spirit of the *Šāh-nāma* is opposing the doctrine of Marxism; a typical example of employing literature to fight the most threatening ideology in those years of war.

In the same year, 1941, a brief introduction to Ferdowsi and the *Šāh-nāma* appeared in *Isuramu no jijō* (The situation of Islam), a journal published by the Foreign Ministry of Japan. Names of the contributors are not given in the journal. An abridged translation of tales of the *Šāh-nāma* by Tsuneo Kuroyanagi was published in 1969. The work, aimed for general public and rendered into Japanese in a plain language, has been well received. In his introduction, the translator underscores the importance of the *Šāh-nāma* for understanding Iranian mind and spirit, and finds in the everlasting struggle between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman (q.v.) an element reflecting onerous life and endeavors of ancient Iranians. He also finds a similarity between Iranian's belief in *farrah-e izadi* (see [FARR\[AH\]](#)) and their devotion to Shi'ism.

See also: [JAPAN xii. TRANSLATIONS OF PERSIAN LITERATURE INTO JAPANESE.](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(titles marked with * are in Japanese):



Iraj Afšār, *Ketāb-šenāsi-e Ferdowsi*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1974, pp. 196-97.

Shigeru Araki, *Perushia bungakushi-kō* * (A literary history of Persia), Tokyo, 1922.

Ferdowsi, *Rostam o Sohrāb*, tr. Higuchi Masaharu as *Rostam to Sohrab**, Tokyo, 1941.

Idem, *Šāh-nāma*, abridged tr. James Atkinson as *The Shāh Nāmeḥ of Persian Poet Firdausī*, London, 1832; tr. Tsuneo Kuroyanagi as *Ō-sho*, Tokyo, 1969.

Chōmei Kamo, *Hōjōki*, tr. A. L. Sadler as *The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of Heike: Two Thirteenth-Century Japanese Classics, the Hojoki and Selections from Heike Monogatari*, Tokyo, 1972.

Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan*, London, 1975; Tokyo, 1982.

Akijirō Soma, tr., *Perushiya no densetsu to rekishi** (Legends and history of Persia), Tokyo, 1922.

Bunmei Tsuchiya, tr., *Perushiya shinwa** (Legends of Persia), Tokyo, 1916.

Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *The Hagakure*, tr. Takao Mukoh, Tokyo, 1980.