

Animism inside Japanese animations

Focused on animations by Hayao Miyazaki

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Abstract

Animism and the Nature-friendly ideology are something like the air that exists naturally for the Japanese. The common values such as a sacredness of the Nature and the sweetness of the Nature for human beings also work as important themes in today's design. Elaborate structure and stability found in the Japanese animation are important values discovered by Japan in its religion and the perspective about the Nature. And these values do not remain as something Japanese, as they are related to have international agreement.

Introduction

The power of animation comes from the exquisite inner structure of character-building and from the outer structure of environment-friendly structure. The number of characters set in the animations is enormous and the animations' perspectives for religion and the Nature are elaborate and relatable to Japanese people. In particular, quite a number of characters those appear in fantasy genre work as connection point to the sensitivity of the Japanese. In Japanese, god is called "kami,"¹⁾ and this is based on the Japanese animism and it's a number of gods that were created naturally. They also present nostalgia from the past in the world market and they present refreshing shock by giving a new perspective about the Nature and human beings. For example, Hayao Miyazaki's "My Neighbor Totoro" presents the ideology of the wood while "Spirited Away" presents the ideology about water and the Nature. Also, his "Princess Mononoke" presents a thinking of circulation and rebirth. This paper aims to make a solid analysis into the Japanese animation and the Japanese ideology by looking into these three animations and by giving diagram analysis into their structures inside them between reality and the other world.

1. Anima, Animism, Animation

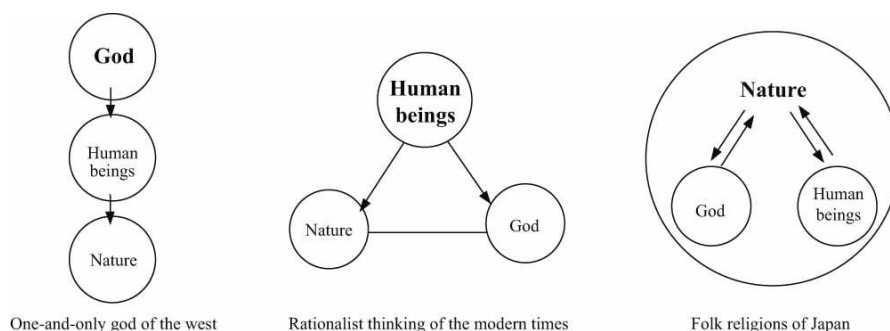
The term animism was used from the early 18th century by philosophers, and it was the British anthropologist Taylor who completed and announced the theoretical frame of the animism in 1871. Animism came from the Latin word, anima, meaning breath, life and spirit, and it is also a religion of spirits in a kind of an original form of religion. That is, it refers to the thoughts or religion that all the things in the Nature carry spirits. In the primitive age, people did not essential distinction among human beings and other beings in the Nature, so animals and plants like everything in the universe carried spirits and souls. When people died, they were believed to be an eternal spirit in the world of the dead or to go into the bodies of animals to become the souls of animals. They believed that there are a number of spirits in the universe, and they believed that these spirits dominate the world of life. Therefore, worship of souls is not only the original form of religion of human beings but also universal thing for all human beings. After all, gods are only a form of souls. The etymology of the word, animation, can be traced in the act of a god that gives life to an object.

2. Folk religion of the Japanese

In the folk religion of Japan, there are human beings and gods under the Nature. This is different from the western religions of the one-and-only god that exist high up there that created the Nature and human beings. In the modernist rationalist thinking, human beings dominate the Nature and the god.

In other words, in the course of the one-and-only god of the western religions, the god dominates the Nature through human beings. However, in the Japanese animism with many gods, neither human beings nor gods belong to the Nature and there is a tendency that the gods and the Nature are almost identified. The Nature and human beings do not have the dominated or dominating relations, and they are neither equals. The Nature has the sacred character. The Nature and human beings give mutual influences to each other. This is the difference from the western concept of one-and-only god.

Table 1) Folk religion of Japan



3. Eight-million godsⁱⁱ

“Spirited Away” is an internationally acclaimed animation as it won awards in the 2002 Berlin International Film Festival and the best animation award in the 2003 Academy Awards. This cemented the status of Japanese animations and the world recognized its power.

This animation seems to be presenting the “Night Parade of a Hundred Ghosts,” and there are a number of ghosts and specters that find the hot spring hotel “Aburaya” to take a rest. These ghosts have enormous influences not only in the emotional abundance but also in the cultural aspect. Various ghosts-related character products are giving immense values and benefits in sales, while they also bring positive effect in the national image of Japan. Japanese ghosts are not just entertainment of the modern times, but also they are industry whose growth is only accelerating.

4. Shinto and jinja

The naturalist religion and animism that believes every object has a spirit inside and every part of the Nature has the god in it, has much to do with the Japanese Shinto. This Japanese religion has created so far an amazing number of jinja, the shrines, and these shrines are mostly the Nature itself. Usually, there is the oldest tree in a village, and that becomes the shrine. Sometimes, in the center of a city, there is a wood and there is a place for worship, which is also a part of an old park. Director Hayao Miyazaki is passionate about Shinto and the wood. In fact, his favorite pastime is to walk in the Meiji Jinja in Tokyo, and he has voiced the need to increase the number of shrines. He said that the reason why there can be shrines in a city is because of the shrines, and his Studio Ghibli’s next project should be increasing the shrines.

In “My Neighbor Totoro,” there is a scene where Satsuki and Mei are waiting for their father with an umbrella at a bus stop. That bus stop is named “In Front of the Inari Shrine,” and the shrine is a famous one in Japan for its red torii (a certain shape of wooden columns at the entrance of a shrine) and for the fox statue, and there are about 32,000 Inari Shrines in Japan nationwide, and Kyoto’s Fushimi Inari Shrine is the head shrine of all. This god is the one that is in charge of plants, and it is known to be the protector of rice plants’ production and abundance. Inari in Japanese means growth of rice. On the other hand, a fox is considered to be a messenger of the god, and it appears here and there in this shrine, and sometimes, it is considered to be the same with the god.

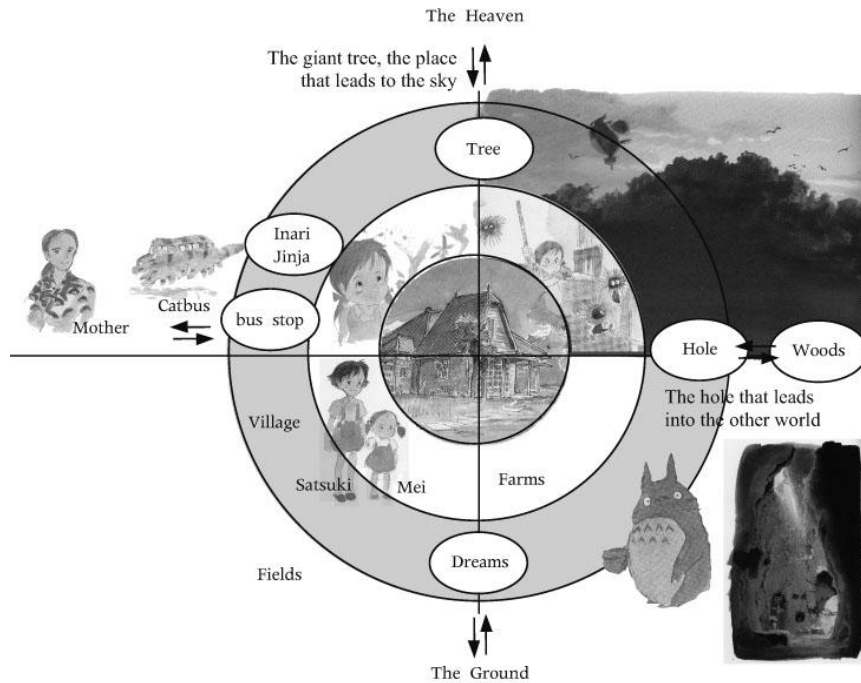
In “My Neighbor Totoro,” the director Miyazaki set this shrine to be the border of the wood and the village, and set the bus stop, which is connected to the other world, before this shrine. This is the place where the girls’ father, who went to work, comes back, and it is also the place that the girls have to pass in order to meet their mother. Here, Satsuki and Mei meet Totoro, the spirit of the Earth. So the Inari Shrine is the symbolic place that represents the power of the Nature and of the god. Also, the scene of the small village in the film is also the image of a hometown in most Japanese people’s hearts. Perhaps Director Miyazaki touched the subconscious love and memory about the Shinto and the wood, which turned out to be a huge success.

5. The meaning of wood to the Japanese

Satsuki and Mei are separated from their mother and move to a small country town. Then they come to meet the spirit of wood, Totoro, and in order to meet this spirit, they have to pass a narrow cave-like path down to the underground, connected to the other world where Totoro lives. Totoro is the god that brings life. It is related to a huge tree and in the emergency when Mei disappeared, Totoro goes up to the sky through this huge tree. They travel by flying through the sky and they pass through the present world, house and village and reach the other place where their mother is, on the Cat Bus. “My Neighbor Totoro” is indeed the god that is so close to our daily lives whom we can meet in our neighbors and become friends with.

Totoro is the master of wood and the Nature itself. Wood is the symbol of abundance and peace, and it has the meaning of the Earth and the power of life. Also, the huge and old tree represents religious symbol that is maternity, abundance, hope and revival. Wood is the protector for the huge tree and the huge tree forms a relation of coexistence together with the Mother of the Earth and the Goddess, which make the background of this animation.

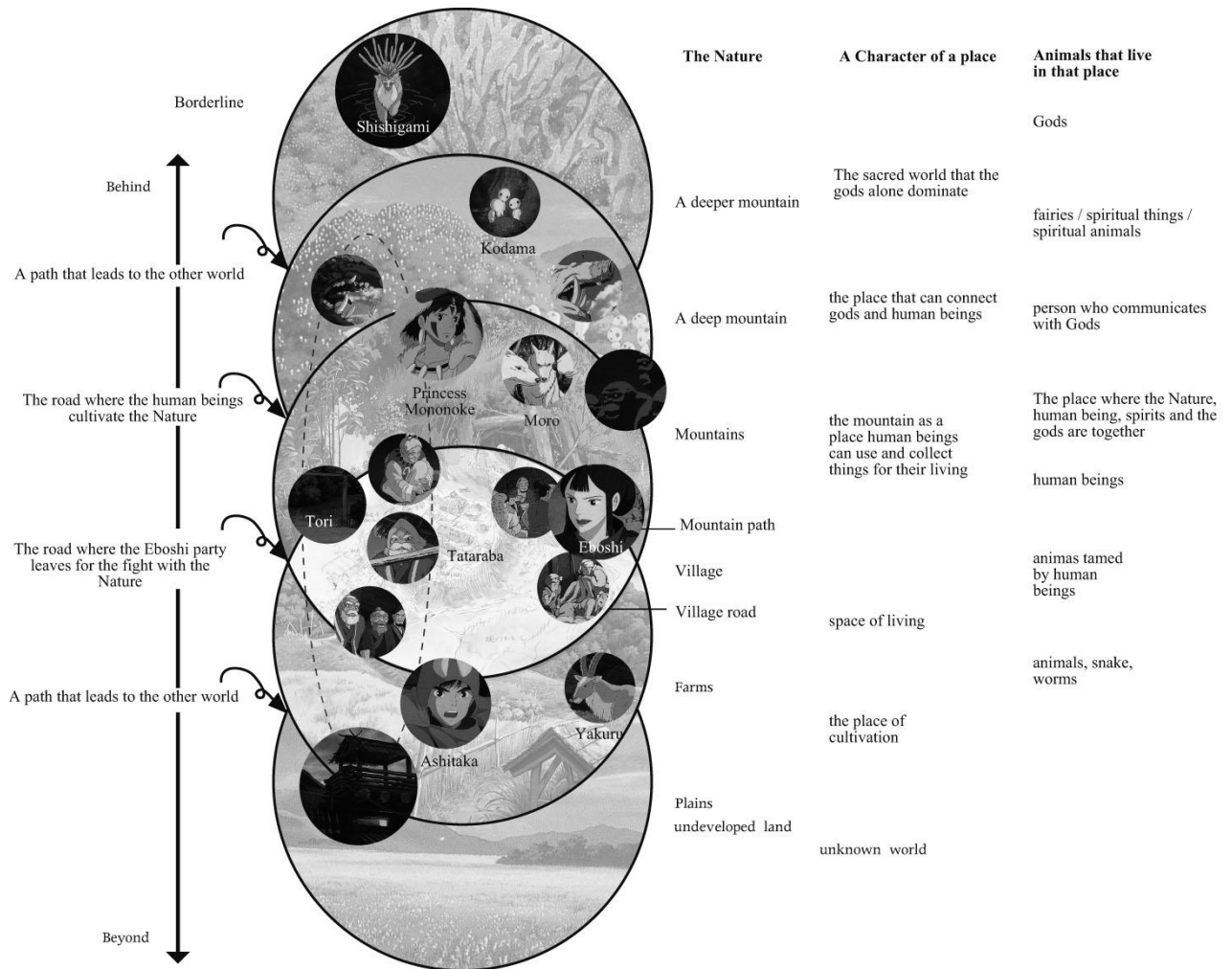
Table 2) Structure of "My Neighbor Totoro" ⁱⁱⁱ



6. Revival and Circulation

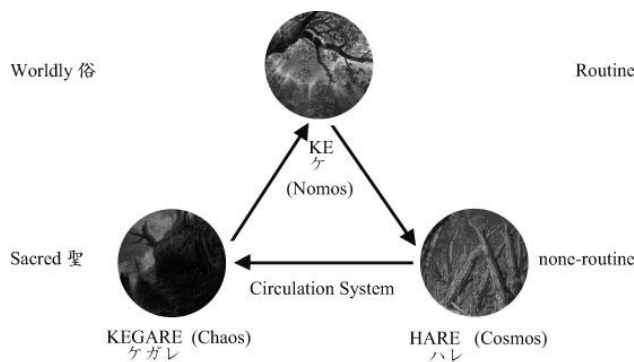
In this animation, the dominant concept is **kamigoroshi**, which is a very Japanese idea, to kill a god and to seek a revival. The leading character, "San," is a being that is in between the Nature and culture, between animal and human beings. "Shishigami" becomes the target of human beings, and the leading character, San (Princess Mononoke) fights to protect Shishigami and the Nature. After all, it is a story that kills Shishigami and revives it, which is the god of life and the Nature. This is based on the perspective of the Nature from the Shinto's animism.

Table3) Structure of "Princess Mononoke" ^{iv}



According to the celebrated Japanese folklore scholar Kunio Yanagida^v, we can hear the explanation of history where **ke**, **kegare** and **hare** repeats in a triangular pattern. **Ke** is the power of life that grows flash and bears fruit. **Kegare**, meanwhile, means dried **ke**. Such a crisis of life always exists around the life of human beings, and people should go back to the daily lives by reviving the **ke**, whose ritual is called a **Matsuri**, meaning both festival and a ritual. Such a **matsuri** is considered to be a non-daily life, and this is the concept of **hare**. In the Shinto belief, a life of the Japanese is daily life(**ke**) to decline of daily life(**kegare**) and then to non-daily life(**hare**). Such cycle is repeated in the Shinto life, and it is also true in "Princess Mononoke."^{vi}

Table4)^{vii} Circulation of Shinto

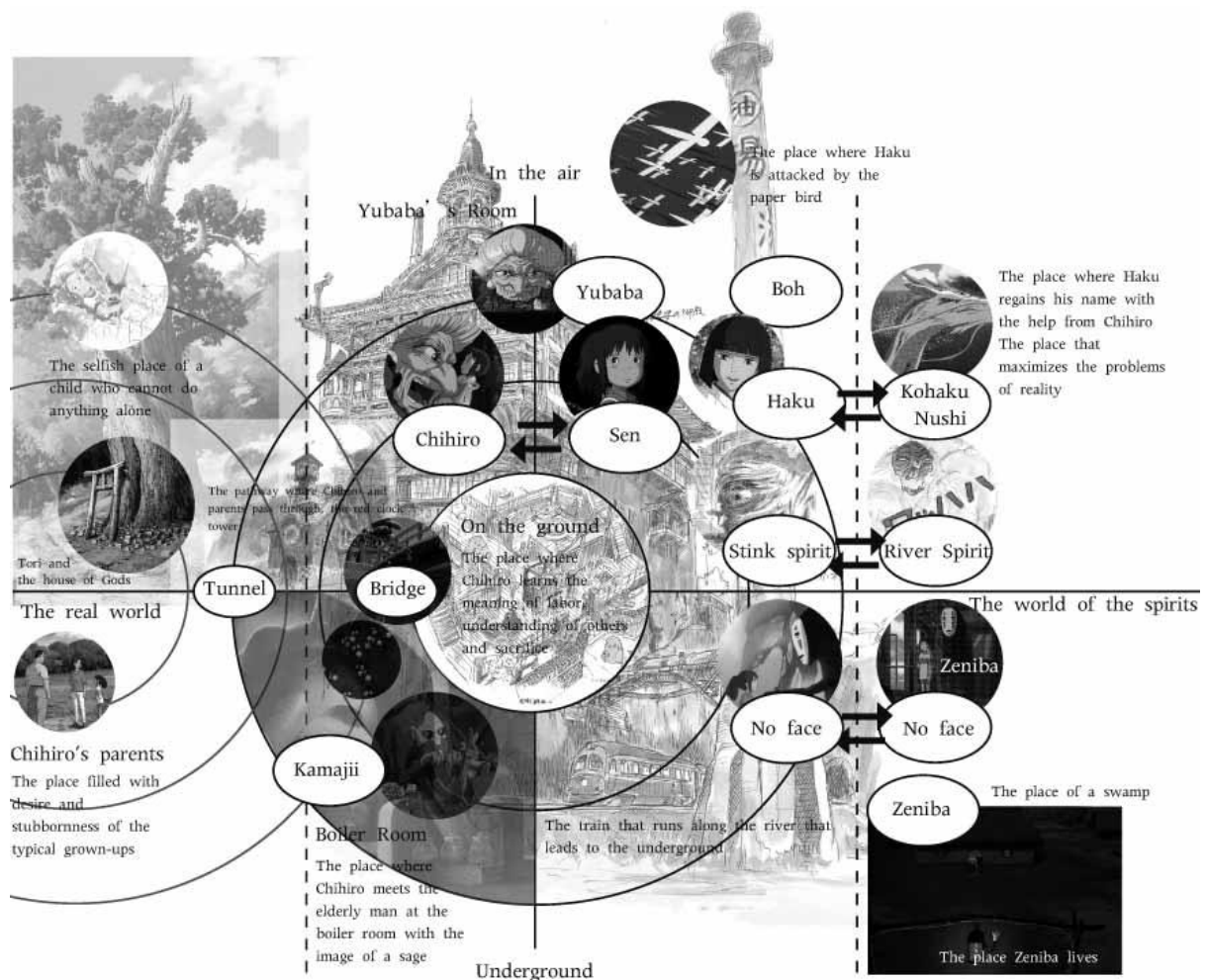


7. Water - the mythical subject matter and the animist subject matter (in the "Spirited Away")

In “Spirited Away”, there appears the mythical image of water. First, there is the hot spring hotel, which is the major background of all happenings in the film. In this animation, guests to the hotel are not human beings but the gods. Many gods take bath and take rest. Hot spring is a place to wash a body, but, to the Japanese, it is also a sublime ritual to wash both mind and body.

Wood is considered to be important in “My Neighbor Totoro” and “Princess Mononoke” as a part of the Woods, in “Spirited Away,” the image of water is considered important. The first important work that is given to Chihiro is to serve the stink spirit, and this becomes a chance for her to grow up. This stink god in the first place was a river spirit, but, after suffering from the accumulated garbage from people’s selfish hearts, it becomes the stink god. Chihiro, in order to help Haku and to save her parents, works hard, and as a result, she returns the stink god back to be the river god, and earns a precious medicine. The image of water is the source of all possibilities, death and rebirth. Haku, who helps Chihiro, is the spirit of the Kohaku River. Chihiro then remembers that Haku saved her when she was little and almost drowned in the river. Haku’s real name is ‘Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi,’ but Yubaba deceives him and he forgets his name to become Yubaba’s close servant. However, with the help of Chihiro, he remembers back his name and returns to be the spirit of the river. Here, trust is established, broken and rebuilt through water. Haku and Chihiro saves each other’s name, and their adventure to find their identity begins in water and returns to water.

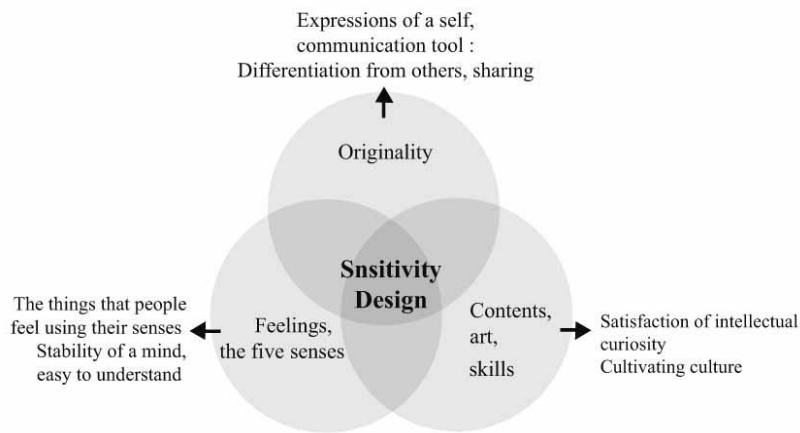
Table5) Structure of characters and background of “Spirited Away”^{viii ix}



8. A cultural business that appeals to sensitivity

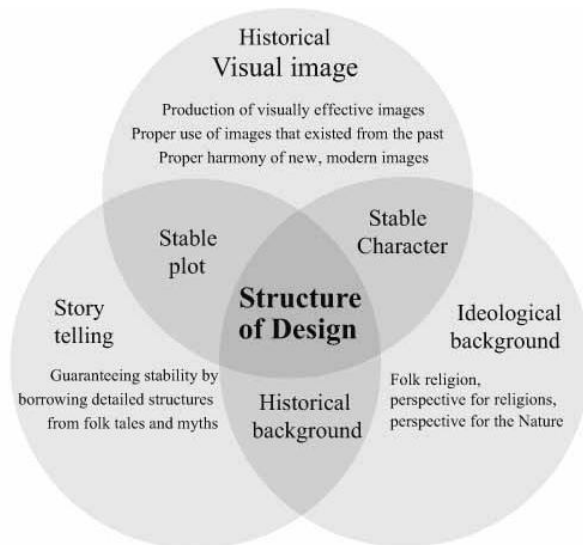
The current status and the desirable future directions about the industry strategies through sensitivity value creation.^x Sensitivity is formed in the environment where an individual is raised, such as culture and tradition and so on, and it is not something to be judged good or bad but is a matter that is inspirational and direct. People come to make choices not by a reason alone but by inspirations, and here, sensitivity is the key.

Table6) Sensitivity Design



What should we do to move sensitivity? There should be efforts to stimulate common consciousness, common experience and common values. Hayao Miyazaki’s works very well use these factors in the animations. His works has a sustainable and stable design strategy. A plan of a conscious past is influenced subconsciously.

Table 7) Design strategy in Hayao Miyazaki’s works



9. Animism inside Japanese animation

Many gods of Japan coexist by sharing the space together, as the gods of Buddhism, the gods of Shinto and gods of folk tales exist together. This tradition of many gods does not only belong to Japan, as there are Greek myths and North European myths. However, Japanese gods are different from the European gods that have human personality or monsters or fairies. There are many gods in Hindu religion and there are many mysterious animals in China such as in “The Shan Hai Jing.”^{xi} However, Japanese succeeded in connecting such a traditional subject matter to the cutting-edge modern industry. This was possible because they had the emotion to treat spirits or monsters as objects for entertainment and culture and enjoyed them.

Of course, there are various perspectives and human characters, and the technology to beautifully describe the Nature. The detailed care and the responsibility for delivering message seem to be what it takes to form a true craftsmanship of today.

Reference

- ⁱ Ono, Sokyo (1962). Shinto: The Kami Way. Tuttle Publishing.
- ⁱⁱ **“Eight million kami”** (八百万の神, ya-o-yorozu no kami) in Japanese the number “eight million” is often used to imply infinity.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The art of Totoro, Studio Ghibli, 徳間書店, 1988
- ^{iv} The princess mononoke, Roman album, 徳間書店, 1987
- ^v Yanagita Kunio (柳田 國男 July 31, 1875 - August 8, 1962) is a scholar who is often known as “the father of Japanese native ethnology.”
- ^{vi} 박규태, 아마테라스에서 모노노케히메까지, 책세상, 2001, 53-54p
- ^{vii} 宗教民俗学、宮家 準、東京大学出版会、1989、80 p -81 p
- ^{viii} Park Ki-soo, 2004, A study of the Narrative Strategies of ‘Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi’
- ^{ix} The art of spirited away, Studio Ghibli, 徳間書店, 2001
- ^x “Sensitivity Value Creation Initiative”, May 2007, a report of finance ministry of Japan
- ^{xi} **The Shan Hai Jing** (Chinese:山海經); pinyin: Shānhǎi Jīng; Wade-Giles: Shan Hai Ching; literally “Classic of the Mountains and Seas”) is a Chinese classic text that is at least 2,000 years old. It is largely a fabled geographical and cultural account of pre-Qin China as well as a collection of mythology.

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