The World of Tales of Times Now Past

Everything is not as it seems within the instructive “setsuwa” of Tales of Times Now Past. This key piece of information is repeated throughout several of the tales, both explicitly and implicitly. This is because, within Tales of Times Now Past, the supernatural regularly interact with the mere mortals of the Earth. Sometimes they appear as benign teachers, and sometimes they appear with the sole intention of tormenting or deceiving. The importance of caution is heavily stressed; one must be ever-aware that a cute little girl could, in actuality, be a malicious Oni or even a Bodhisattva. A general understanding of the Japanese supernatural is therefore needed to properly engage the Tales of Times Now Past. Whether one aims to be entertained or taught by these setsuwa, he or she will need to be (at least) gently acquainted with the religion of Buddhism and the supernatural elements of Japanese culture.

It has been speculated that the Tales of Times Now Past was written and compiled in order to teach simple lessons, or explain a few of life’s mysterious phenomenon. In this sense the book could be seen as a thicker, more complicated, and Japanese version of Aesop’s Fables. Each tale is relatively short, and contains a single, simple life lesson (usually relating to Buddhism) that is meant to be left with the reader. “This shows why everyone should invoke and meditate on Kannon” (Shirane, 548), the book chimes, after telling a brief story about how a man named Yoshifuji, full of lust, becomes inappropriately attached to a “young woman”, who is actually a fox. Only through the mercy of Kannon and “having Yoshifuji bathe repeatedly” (Shirane 537) is he able to cleanse himself of the impurity he has brought into his life. This tale would require the reader to already know about the deceptive nature of the fox and the healing power of Kannon in order to grasp it’s full lesson, which says that one should be cautious when encountering the unknown, and weary of attachment. Other things to know when reading include the “special principle” of how to make one’s rice bowl fly (Shirane 550), the “merit acquired by reciting the Lotus Sutra or having faith in it” (Shirane 530), and that “to hand one’s bows and arrows to someone you have never before laid eyes on is surely the height of stupidity” (Shirane 558). The world of Tales of Times Now Past serves as a bizarre mirror to our own, where *more* is possible because of the fantastical elements that accompany the setsuwa, which encompass common sense, spiritual enlightenment, and solid secular advice.

Anyone attempting to lead a successful love life, become enlightened through the teachings of Buddhism, or even avoid the “height of stupidity” would be well met by Tales of Times Now Past. The tales not only provide a reason for natural phenomenon that occur, such as madness, but give the reader a supposed means of avoiding such tragedy through the rituals and devotions of Buddhism. Along with being an entertaining read, the book provides a set of general guidelines by which to live one’s life, and an understanding for the forces that shape the world around him.