

TOKYO'S DR. PHIL¹
BENJAMIN DORMAN
NANZAN UNIVERSITY

"In any case, you're going to fall into hell!" With that, Kazuko Hosoki, Japan's most famous fortune teller, brushed off a well-known actor who dared question her "reading" of his allegedly irresponsible behavior toward his children on the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) network on August 17, 2004. A formidable matronly figure with a sharp tongue and quick wit, Hosoki, 67, is a hit with Japanese viewers, who tune in in large numbers to watch her semi-regular TBS show, *Zubari iu wa yo!* ("I'm gonna give it to you straight!"). She also makes regular appearances on TBS's rival, Fuji Television.

Over the past two decades, Hosoki has moved from being merely a "fortune teller to the stars" to a general lifestyle guru - and an object of close media scrutiny as well. Her face is regularly featured in subway advertisements for tabloids claiming to dish the latest dirt on her. Last August, for example, the weekly magazine *Shūkan Shinchō* ran a story that purported to expose weaknesses in her predictions. But while such criticism has plagued her since the beginning of her public career as a fortune teller in the early 1980s, it hasn't hurt her popularity.

Hosoki's success rests, to a large extent, on the divination books that she has been producing at an extraordinary rate since 1982. In 2001, the *Guinness Book of Records*, citing 34 million in sales, pronounced her to be the world's "Best-selling Author of Fortune Telling Books."

Various forms of divination have long been practiced in Japan at Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and by a number of new religious movements. Divination is available in multiple formats, from traditional booth fortunetelling and print media to Internet websites. Writing in the major daily *Asahi Shinbun* in the fall of 2003, Taken Maruyama estimated that the Japanese spend over \$9 billion on divination annually.

Hosoki claims to have derived her particular system, *rokusei senjutsu*, from Chinese divination. People's lives are said to operate in 12-year cycles divided into four three-year periods. The final period, *satsukai* ("the world of death"), is a time when misfortune and disaster may occur. Toward the end of 2004, Hosoki announced that she herself was about to go through a period of *satsukai*. But to the surprise of her critics, she continued her television appearances, going so far as to state, on a TBS four-hour prime time special that aired September 6, that she was "cruising through it and having a great time." If one knows the fundamental principles of enduring the inevitable *satsukai* period, she explained, one can get through it with no difficulty. All her books have sections on how people can avoid the negative effects of *satsukai*.

Hosoki's life has not lacked for color. In her late teens, she began managing a series of clubs and coffee shops in Tokyo, eventually opening a club of her own. By the time she was 21, she had married, divorced, and incurred large debts. She ended up being pursued by gangsters, whose loans she finally paid back.

In 1983, she married Masahiro Yasuoka, a nationalist intellectual and spiritual advisor to many high-ranking members of Japan's political and business elite, including a number of postwar prime ministers. Hosoki states in her books that Yasuoka taught her about Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese divination. He died the same year they married, and shortly thereafter she began appearing in the gossip columns of weekly magazines as a fortune teller to Japanese celebrities.

Although the divination industry is big business in Japan, it is important to understand, as sociologist Hiroyuki Taneda pointed out a few years ago, that the public does not necessarily *believe* that divination

1 Reprinted with permission from *Religion in the News*, Winter 2006 (8.3).

works. For that reason, Taneda argued, fortune tellers need to develop strategies to convince consumers of the value of their teachings. Part of Hosoki's strategy has been to have her divination incorporate ancestor worship, a major form of Japanese religious practice.

According to Japanese folk wisdom, if ancestors are not venerated, their spirits will cause problems for the living. Traditionally, ancestors were venerated as household gods. Responsibility for this lay with male descendants; indeed, it was taboo for a wife to bring her own ancestral tablets or memorials into her husband's home.

While modernization and urbanization gradually led to the disintegration of such ancient household practices, the Japanese public continues to embrace beliefs associated with ancestors. Nowadays, practices and beliefs connected to ancestor worship are particularly associated with Buddhism, which many contemporary Japanese rely on for rituals surrounding funerals and death. Some new religious movements also incorporate elements of ancestor worship.

In 1985, the same year that she published her first bestseller (a primer exclusively devoted to divination), Hosoki also brought out *Change Your Destiny Through Ancestor Worship*, which invoked commonly accepted religious ideas and made frequent references to *kami* (gods) and *hotoke* (Buddhas). And although, over the years, she has continued to publish on divination alone, a number of her books have focused on how *rokusei senjutsu* grounds divination in ancestor worship. This system's ancient "shared" wisdom - which she claims is scientific, rational, commonsensical, and virtually forgotten by people today - holds that:

*** Ancestor worship is absolutely fundamental if one is to change one's destiny.**

While one might be able to *read* one's destiny through divination alone, in order to *change* it one must engage in ancestor worship. People who establish and maintain a proper gravesite for their ancestors will, if they live properly, be protected by *kami* (who are equated with nature).

*** Ancestor worship is connected to what it means to be Japanese.**

Ancestor worship rituals, such as offering rice and water on an altar, clapping one's hands together and bowing before an altar before leaving the house, and visiting the graves of deceased ancestors, are simply common sense and should come naturally to all Japanese.

*** Ancestor worship is not religious practice, but one can practice ancestor worship through the religion of one's family.**

It is a big mistake to suppose, as most Japanese do, that ancestor worship is a religious (i.e., Buddhist) activity. Related to Confucianism, which is not a religion but a "way of life for human beings," ancestor worship is nonetheless traditional - for example, primary responsibility for it remains with the male head of household.

Since the late 1980s, Hosoki has not avoided being lumped in with a number of groups that have been accused of exploiting belief in ancestors' spirits through the sale of protective amulets and other spiritual goods and services. For example, writing in the November 2004 issue of the monthly media watchdog journal *Tsukuru*, Kyōichirō Nanase reported that Hosoki was criticized in the late 1980s for selling gravestones. Like other revelations about her, however, this has done little to undermine her credibility with the public at large.

After the horrendous gas attack by the religious group Aum Shinrikyō in 1995, television networks (including TBS, which was harshly criticized for failing to contact the police about a murder investigation concerning Aum members*) avoided programming clairvoyants, spiritual healers, and new age mysticism. Since then, however, there has been a revival of sorts, and Hosoki is one its major figures.

Writing in *Seikyō Shinbun*, the newspaper of the major religious movement Sōka Gakkai, on August 17, Shinpei Higashi portrayed Hosoki (without referring to her by name) as part of a new "age of

shamanism" in Japan. Rather than seeking answers to problems by themselves, Japanese citizens are, in Higashi's view, relying more and more on fortune tellers and clairvoyants who write books and appear on television.

By way of example, he pointed to a recent TV program in which Hosoki issued a stern warning for people never to place photographs of the deceased on a Buddhist altar. The M.C., a popular male comedian, responded by saying, "You're teaching us things we've all forgotten." Higashi's point was that such programs set up people like Hosoki as fountains of "lost" knowledge whose pronouncements go unchallenged.

In fact, nothing is more striking about Hosoki than her emergence as an arbiter of contemporary Japanese mores. Recent TV programs have featured her facing large rows of schoolgirls and berating the more insolent ones for their "shameful" ways of dressing and disrespect for elders. She has also locked horns with high school teachers over the state of the educational system. (It is, she feels, failing society because it has abandoned "traditional values.")

Such programs are advertised with close-ups of Hosoki glaring at the hapless objects of her wrath, their lips quivering in anticipation of withering verbal criticism. The ratings soar.

As Japan's preeminent media shaman, Hosoki is symptomatic of a broader turn to - or nostalgia for - the old social verities in the wake of the collapse of the real estate bubble of the 1980s as well as the Aum disaster. This phenomenon is reflected in the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki, such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, which amount to a religious critique of postwar Japanese materialism and consumerism. To be sure, Hosoki does not herself reject the things of this world. On the contrary: A recent TV program showed her swanning around Switzerland spending thousands on clothes and jewelry. Her message is that while Japanese people should reach back to the past for answers to their problems in the present, there is no need to eradicate the desire to accumulate and consume.

How deeply the revival of spiritual traditionalism will affect Japanese society is anybody's guess. For now, however, talented self-promoters like Hosoki are exploiting it brilliantly.