



The Other Side of Hospitality —Through a Japanese Folktale—

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Abstract

“The Crane Wife” is an old Japanese folktale that belongs to the genre of “interspecies marriage” stories. This story can be also read as one of hospitality. The theme of the story is the prohibition “You must not look.” What exactly happens at the moment the taboo is broken and the act of hospitality breaks off? We can examine this problematic moment by referring to Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. In so doing, it is revealed that a failure of hospitality can simultaneously be a hidden path to its “success.”

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1. “The Crane Wife”

“The Crane Wife” is an old Japanese folktale that belongs to the genre of “interspecies marriage” stories. There are many examples of this genre, such as “The Snake Wife,” “The Tortoise Wife,” and “The Clam Wife.” Among these stories, “The Crane Wife” has gone beyond the confines of folklore and is beloved by many people—to the point that it has served as the material for an opera entitled *Yuzuru*.¹ The story exists in many versions because it is a folktale, but in general, it goes as follows.

Once upon a time, there was a young man who lived all alone in the mountains. He worked hard in the mountains, but he was always poor. One winter day, when he was on his way home from collecting wood, he heard a

¹ Kinoshita, Junji. *Kinoshita Junji sakuhin shû, dai ikkan (Collected Works of Kinoshita Junji, Vol. 1)*, Miraisha, 1962, pp. 63-98.

strange sound. Curious, the young man went to see what it was. He found a beautiful crane that had been shot with an arrow.

The young man felt sorry for the crane, so he rescued it and then released it. He just said to the crane, “Next time, be a little more careful.” The crane made a loud cry as if to answer and flew away high into the sky.

A few days later, on a very snowy night, someone knocked on the front door of his humble house. He asked himself, “Who could that be on a night like tonight?” Then a young woman—who was actually the crane that had been rescued by the young man—said, “I’m traveling and unfortunately I’ve lost my way. Could you please provide me with accomodation for the night?”

The young man willingly agreed. Although he didn’t have much, the young man gave the young woman a hot meal. Outside, the snow began to blow, and it continued for the next day and the next.

Finally, the snowstorm was over. And on a clear blue day, the young woman said, “Please take me as your wife.” The young man was surprised at her sudden proposal but accepted it willingly. So they became husband and wife, and lived a frugal yet happy life.

One day, the young woman demanded that her husband get her some thread for weaving. He bought that just as she wished. As she went into the tiny room in the house, the young woman said to the young man, “When I am weaving, you must never peek inside. Promise me. Promise me truly.”

The young woman kept weaving for three days and nights without leaving the room. As he had promised, the young man did not look into the room. On the morning of the fourth day, the young woman came out of the room and presented her husband with a smooth and beautiful piece of cloth. But the young woman looked a bit thinner.²

“Take this to town and sell it,” she told him. Doing as she asked, the young man took the cloth, went to town, and sold it at once. With the money that they had made, they were able to eat better than usual.

After a while, the young woman went back into the weaving room. But this time, despite his promise, the young man peeked into the room where his wife was weaving.

To his surprise, the young woman, who he was sure had to be there, was not there. However, there was a crane weaving its own feathers into cloth. It was the crane that the man had rescued at one time. With her true identity revealed, the crane could no longer remain with the young man. She flew off into the sky. The young man was left standing all alone in the snow looking up at the sky.

In both the East and the West, tales of interspecies marriage have revolved around taboos against looking. This tale has many diverse versions. In all versions, the theme of taboo is commonly seen as the focal point of the story.

² Interestingly, in the Japanese, YASASHI (tenderly) and YASE (thin) are common etymologically.

Thus, the most common interpretation of the tale concerns the breaking of the taboo (opening the door) because of which the man, who idealized the woman, has been disillusioned with his naive fantasy so far.

In fact, Kitayama Osamu,³ a Japanese psychoanalyst, has made some psychological observations regarding the concept of the prohibition against looking. We agree with these interpretations, but there is still something mysterious about this tale. The moment one would like to focus of the present paper is the moment when the man opens the door to the tiny room. This one moment is the major focal point of the story. If it were a movie scene, it would be silent and the action would take place in slow motion. However, this moment is not described in detail in the actual folktale, and it is even omitted in some cases.

In most versions of the tale, there are scenes in which the man regrets opening the door when he notices what is happening, or in which he tries to persuade the fleeing crane to stay. However, this moment that is not written about, that is not spoken about—this moment in which the man sees that which is not human—should be the moment that requires a maximum amount of attention.

In order to approach this unspoken moment, we examine “The Crane Wife” from a different point of view. Certainly this tale can be read as a story about prohibition if we look at it from the viewpoint of the man who is desperate to maintain the framework of his fantasy. However, this tale can also be read as one that is permeated with the theme of hospitality.

2. About Hospitality

If one has an impression of the word “hospitality” as something like “warmhearted reception,” then that concept will immediately be swept away through reading this paper. The hospitality discussed here is something violent, even traumatic, far removed from the peaceful vocabulary that the word invokes. We would like to begin with the story of Lot and his daughters from the Book of Genesis, which Jacques Derrida presented in his seminar *on hospitality*.⁴ After leaping almost acrobatically between references to a wide variety of texts, including the Dialogues of Plato, the tragedies of Sophocles, Pierre Klossowski’s *Les lois de l’hospitalité* (*The Laws of Hospitality*), and Immanuel Kant’s *Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen* (*On a supposed right to lie out of love for humanity*), he concludes by referring to

³ Kitayama, Osamu. *Gekiteki na seishin bunseki nyûmon* (*Introduction to Dramatic Psychoanalysis*), Misuzu Shobô, 2007. In specific terms, Kitayama’s observations are directed at Kinoshita Junji’s opera *Yuzuru* (*Twilight Crane*) (1949).

⁴ Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle, *De l’hospitalité*, 1997. English version: *Of Hospitality*, translated by Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, 2000.

the story of Lot and his daughters. This is apt material for probing the essence of hospitality.

Lot provides lodging for two foreign guests—actually messengers from God—who have come to the city of Sodom. However, even though the visitors have barely had time to settle in, the men of Sodom crowd around the house. They gather at the door, planning to abuse the guests. Lot responds by closing the door behind him and pleads with them, saying,

*I beg you, my brothers, do no such wicked thing. Listen, I have two daughters who are virgins. I am ready to send them out to you, to treat as it pleases you. But as for the men do nothing to them, for they have come under the shadow of my roof.*⁵ (Genesis 19:7–8, *The Jerusalem Bible*)

The astonishing thing is that, in order to protect these complete strangers, these guests to whom he bears no obligation, Lot does not hesitate to offer his own daughters. Viewed rationally, this is clearly an outrageous act. However, despite this, Derrida explains it as follows. No matter what price one has to pay, there is an unconditional law of unlimited hospitality. So what might this be?

*... Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.*⁶

In order not to be distracted by the traumatic aspects of excessive hospitality, I would first like to identify the characteristics of this hospitality that has been brought into question. In my view, these characteristics can be classified into three categories.

The first category has to do with when guests arrive unexpectedly at any time. The host (in this case Lot) has no time to make preparations. Even so, the host must provide hospitality for these capricious guests at any time. This may be called *the unexpected arrival nature of hospitality*. This is an unexpected visit, an invitation without an invitation.

The second category is that one absolutely must show hospitality to such guests. In the story of Lot, the host, in order to guarantee the safety of the guests, does not hesitate to sacrifice his own daughters. Rather, that kind of ungrudging favor is expected. The host who does not hesitate to offer the life

⁵ Ibid. p. 153.

⁶ Ibid. p. 25.

of a loved one for the sake of a guest does this as if he is offering everything without any hesitation.

Certainly, as anthropological sources abundantly attest, giving has its aspects of displaying power or announcing the beginning of a competition. The word “potlatch,” used to describe competitive gift-giving, originally meant “provide food” or “consume” when used as a verb, or “the person who provides food” or “the place where one eats one’s fill” when used as a noun. The food offered on occasions of hospitality is wasted in the sense that it is given in massive quantities that are impossible to finish, so it is offered senselessly. Certainly, giving it is a display of power, and it announces the beginning of a competition. But with hospitality, it is not as if the host controls the gift but that he is subordinate to the guest (or the gift itself). This may be called *the absolute subordinacy* of hospitality.

The third category is that the host is not supposed to ask the guest’s name when practicing hospitality. During an act of hospitality, foreigners literally remain foreigners. The host must receive guests without asking their names, birthplaces, professions, or, in other words, any part of their backgrounds, leaving their identities up in the air. This is *the anonymity* of hospitality.

Summarizing the above, as Derrida says, the guest receiving unconditional hospitality 1) descends upon the host unexpectedly, 2) places host in a position of absolute subordination, and 3) will remain an anonymous person without a name. Conversely, the act of receiving the kind of guest who announces his visit in advance, the untroublesome guest, the guest whose background is clearly known, cannot be considered as unconditional hospitality. Even if the guest does not notice the host peeking out through the door’s peephole, identifying who the guest is and where the guest is from, and only then opening the door to admit the guest, this cannot be called “unconditional hospitality.” The kind of hospitality that we can imagine in our everyday lives is “conditional hospitality.”

With conditional hospitality, there is something that the host knows about the guest. That sort of guest is thus detached from true otherness (because the Other always includes truly unknown aspects), is an entity positioned as an extension of one’s self, and resembles one’s self. In such conditional hospitality, both the host and the guest can relax in their commonality. In contrast to the oppressiveness of the previously mentioned unconditional hospitality, there is, in a certain sense, a guarantee of a calm and pleasant space in conditional hospitality.

3. “The Crane Wife” as a story of hospitality

Let us return, then, to the story “The Crane Wife.”

I would like to refer to Seki Keigo⁷ and confirm the elements that make up the story, with reference to the various versions that exist in other regions of Japan.

First, at the beginning of the story, the crane is in mortal danger. In most versions, the crane has been shot with an arrow, but in other cases children are tormenting it, or adults are about to sell it. The man rescues the crane from this danger out of kindness. In cases where money comes into play, the man often gives away all the money he has on him.⁸ Here we already find one of the elements of hospitality, *absolute giving*. However, in several versions, this interposition is lacking. In those cases, the woman’s visit involves a greater degree of suddenness.

Then, several days later, a young woman—actually the crane disguised as a young woman— suddenly comes to visit the man’s home. The man gladly takes this unexpected guest into his home. Usually, the crane appears in the guise of a young woman. In rare cases, the crane takes the form of an old woman,⁹ but even in this case the element of hospitality is constant.

Following this reception comes the heart of the story. The man breaks his promise and opens the door of the room. In spite of the order (“You must not look”), he breaks the taboo.

Then, eventually, with her true nature revealed, the crane, which is now no longer human, leaves their home. The crane’s fate ranges from simply flying away to disappearing suddenly and leaving a cryptic message about her whereabouts,¹⁰ to dying (hanging herself, jumping into a pond, and so on), and even to leaving a child behind. There are even endings in which the man himself becomes a crane, providing a finale that breaks away from the conventions of tales of interspecies marriage.¹¹ These kinds of endings necessarily turn the tale into a tragedy, but there are also versions in which the separation is portrayed in a lighthearted manner, and there are more than a few versions with happy conclusions, in which the assets that the woman has left behind allow the man to live happily ever after.

⁷ Seki, Keigo, *Nihon mukashibanashi shûsei, dai ichi bu* (Collection of Japanese Tales of Long Ago, Part One), Kadokawa Shoten, 1950, pp. 201-204.

⁸ For example, the islands off Satsuma-gun, Kagoshima prefecture; Kamiuke-gun, Ehime prefecture.

⁹ Iki-gun, Nagasaki prefecture. In this case, just as he is about to leave for home, the sun sets, and the crane appears as an old woman who offers him one night’s lodging. This may be a case of conflation with another story, but even though the main character is the opposite of that in the classic tale, the occurrence of an act of hospitality is the same.

¹⁰ For example, leaving a needle [*hari*] on a plate [*sara*] as a clue that she has gone to Saragaike Pond in Harima province.

¹¹ Uzen-oguni, Yamagata prefecture. In this case, he puts on the piece of cloth that the crane left behind, covers his face with it, and becomes a crane.

In summary, at the beginning of the tale, the woman arrives suddenly and without warning. This action fulfills the first requirement for unconditional hospitality, the *unexpected nature of the arrival*. The man begins by offering this unexpected guest one night's lodging, and he accepts all the woman's requests, such as making her his wife. This action fulfills the second requirement for unconditional hospitality, absolute subordinacy. Thus, the woman is received with unconditional hospitality. At least it is possible to say so at this time. Yet a crisis occurs.

Breaking his promise to the woman not to look, the man opens the door of the room where she is weaving. This action amounts to asking about the guest's background. This action does not fulfill the requirement of unconditional hospitality for *anonymity*.

Of course, we cannot ignore the element of violating a prohibition. More than anything else, what is broken is the law of unconditional hospitality.

The man probably wants to draw the woman closer to him or to understand her better. This act amounts to "asking her name." Here is where unconditional hospitality is derailed.

In this sense, the conclusion in which the crane leaves can be said to suggest the extinction of otherness, the annihilation of the Other. The reason for this is that what falls away in a reversal from unconditional hospitality to conditional hospitality is otherness.

This reversal involves violence, and that, after all, results in the elimination of the disruptive element (the Other). That which spills out understanding is what people call the Other. Understanding (*comprendre*) is a word that one cannot use in reference to a true Other. The self-centered state in which one is obsessed with taking people who are "nonself" and naming them, controlling them, accepting them, consuming them, discarding them, or engaging in other acts that can be described with transitive verbs, is what Levinas called "violence."¹² In this sense, conditional hospitality that seeks to understand (subsume) the Other by asking his or her background can be called a kind of violence.

Communication that aims for integration leads to abandonment of the Other. When we try to gain knowledge of the Other through his name, the Other has lost his place and is no longer the Other. The Other is one who is outside of understanding. At the end of the tale, the crane's need to disappear comes from her having been robbed of her "place" through violence. In other words, letting the Other remain in the place one has given him is something that arises through hospitality. If that is so, "The Crane Wife" may be a tale of transformation from unconditional hospitality to conditional hospitality. This is our tentative hypothesis.

¹² Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totalité et infini*, 1961. It was Derrida who pointed out that the appearance of the Other, the manifestation of the Other, marks the commencement of violence as well as of hospitality ("Violence et métaphysique" in *L'écriture et la différence*, 1967).

We have interpreted the moment when the prohibition in “The Crane Wife” is violated as the moment when unconditional hospitality is dissolved. In other words, we have viewed it as a failure of unconditional hospitality.

However, what constitutes a failure and a success of unconditional hospitality in the first place? And could we simply classify hospitality into two categories, that is, unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality? In that case, all hospitality would include both aspects. Furthermore, unconditional hospitality does not appear only at the moment of conditional hospitality, that is, as an aspect of conditional hospitality. So we can talk about unconditional hospitality only on the level of myth or folktale. To read this tale more deeply, we must refer to the words “host” and “guest.”

4. Who is the Host?

In unconditional hospitality, receiving the Other entirely as an Other is required. However, why must the host provide hospitality to the anonymous Other? The foreigner standing before you may be a murderer who aims to take your life. There is no conceivable way to eliminate that possibility. If that is the case, in a situation where the host must hesitate in the face of potential antagonism, is it not appropriate first to ask the guest’s name and identify him, that is, to guarantee a bit of security? Viewed in the light of reason, must the host receive the guest with hospitality, no matter what sacrifices the host has to make? A clue to solving this riddle may be found in the words “host” and “guest.”

The English word “host” expresses only one meaning, “the one who gives hospitality,” but the French word *hôte* preserves the essence of its etymology to the present day, having at the same time the completely opposite meanings of the one who gives hospitality and the guest who receives hospitality.

The French word *hôte* (guest, host) comes from the Latin *hostis* (enemy, outsider) and *hospes* (host, guest).¹³ The latter comes from *hosti-pet*, and the *-pet* element is related to the Latin *potis*, which originally meant a person’s identity. Within the family group, this meant “the one who is most the master of himself.” In addition, the verbal form *pote est*, *potest*, also includes the meanings of “ability” and “power” (*pouvoir*). Originally, *hostis* was based on a view of equality through recompense, and, for that reason, *hostis* meant “the

¹³ The Latin word *hospes* is defined in Latin-French dictionaries first as *celui qui reçoit l’hospitalité* (“one who receives hospitality”) and then as *celui qui donne l’hospitalité* (“one who gives hospitality”). Thus, one word aims for a double meaning in which the one who receives is the guest, and the one who gives is the host. The English word “host” expresses only one meaning, “the one who gives hospitality,” but the French *hôte* preserves the essence of the etymology to the present day, having at the same time the completely opposite meanings of “the one who gives hospitality” and “the guest who receives hospitality.” For Latin-French dictionaries, see Félix Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire illustré latin-français*, Paris, Hachette, 1934, and others.

person who provides recompense by giving me gifts in return (*contre-don*), so it intrinsically meant “guest.” Thus *hosti-pet* came to mean “one who embodies superb hospitality (*hospitalité*).” That is to say, the host who receives the guest, the host who believes that he owns the place, is actually the guest who is received in his own house, in a sort of reverse law of hospitality. The receiver (host) changes places with the received (guest), so that an odd situation arises within hospitality.

If a plot twist in which the receiver (host) has already been received (guest) arises, why is that the case? One conceivable response is that the Other is always already gestating within me. The Other is always inside me. The Other is already nested inside me, to the extent that one no longer have any leeway for posing the question “Why must we provide hospitality?”

There is no way to escape the Other. The Other persistently follows me like a ghost. There is no longer anywhere to flee. There arises within me an infinite responsibility to respond (*responsabilité*). It will not do to look at this concept of responsibility without referring to Emmanuel Levinas’s theory of the Other.

Usually, responsibility is something that we can respond to, or, at least, it is the ability to accomplish something. However, what Levinas refers to as *responsabilité* is completely different from that kind of responsibility. More than complete passivity, it is passive passivity, to the extent that one cannot think of it in tandem with activity. This is infinite responsibility that one cannot bring to an end or exhaust. For that reason, it may be better to say that it is an endless reproach from the Other, rather than a responsibility. That it is an entirely passive, deathless reproach that one is already burdened with when one notices it. I must respond to the reproach from the Other without resisting.

Responding to the Other, who has already eaten into me like a bone stuck in my throat, I must assume the impossible position of entering into myself and listening to what the Other says. This is the very situation of psychoanalysis.

We can say that hospitality is the impossible event of granting a place to the Other who has eaten into me. Thus the incomprehensible place where this impossible speech arises is what hospitality offers. The subject gives himself within himself, or, in other words, disappears. Thus the subject who had the initiative and the right to speak actively no longer exists. With hospitality, the subject is a complete hostage to the hostile Other.

5. “The Crane Wife,” again

Let us now return to “The Crane Wife.” In section 3, we assumed this tale to be about a transformation from unconditional hospitality to conditional hospitality. But this hypothesis will be rejected.

Let us look again at the most mysterious moment that we focused on, the unspoken moment of opening of the door of the room. In the end, what has the man encountered?

In the place where the beautiful, lovable woman should be, there is the figure of an archaic animal. (In this sort of tale, the animal that appears is not one that lives in relative amiability with humans, like a cat or dog.) An animal of a different species has invaded the home, which ought to be the most intimate domain of the human being. If we think in simple terms, it would not be odd if the crane were killed at that moment. For the wild animal, it must be a dangerous moment and vulnerable exposure.

At this point, might the man not have received what Levinas calls “the face (*visage*),” that is, the precept “Thou shalt not kill”? The “face” that we refer to here must be given a unique nuance. Simply put, it is the empty space where Otherness can manifest itself in its most intense form. And “Thou shalt not kill” are the words of the face turned toward the subject.

The emergence of the face is the phenomenological mode of the Other as well as the advent of the true Other, absolute Otherness. By receiving the precepts of the face, the man who has accepted the woman is denied his egoism, and in that moment is required to be born as a subject who takes on the infinite responsibility for the Other who is manifested there.

The face is never represented and is never understood. The face rejects the idea of being contents, and that is not understood. At the outset, there is no need to explain the face, because all explanations are initiated in the face.

More than anything, the face is something that rejects becoming the contents of our egos. The face denies the meanings I assign to it. While it rejects and denies, the face also speaks to us, demands responses from us, and asks us to welcome it in.

We can now hear, in that undrawn moment, Levinas’s “Thou shalt not kill,” imposed by the face. It has none of the scandalous (that is, alluring) characteristics that prohibitions generally include. What is in there is a manifestation of the Other that is like closeness itself, even though for a brief moment, the young man encountered this impossible Other. So at the end of story, there is not a failure but rather the success of unconditional hospitality.

Strictly speaking, we cannot simply say that unconditional hospitality exists. It is an event that can never be allowed to continue, but it leaves a trace that is not completely traceable. This trace gives you an effect, and you, who receive this effect, are no longer the same one as one were.

We are not the same one, before and after traversing hospitality. Now that one has received the precept “Thou shalt not kill,” no one can take his place in fulfilling his responsibility, and one cannot flee from that responsibility. This is the starting point for the subject who gives up the egotism of acceptance and has infinite responsibility for the Other.

6. Psychoanalysis and hospitality

As we saw previously, from this confrontation with an animal—rather, a better way of putting it is probably “with Otherness”—to the closing scenes, this tale

branches off into many variations. The most overwhelming images occur in the subsequent events. If that is where new signification arises, this is a natural outcome. With a new resolve, the man may begin to work earnestly, or the kindly old couple may live happily off the assets that the crane left behind. This is a typical didactic tale that promotes diligence and virtue, influenced by the morality of the early modern and nineteenth-century city dwellers and common people and by Confucianism. Or the conclusion may have arisen out of the Christian value of thankfulness.

However, when we read this folktale based on the thought of Levinas, in advance of this kind of moral processing, we can stop and take a look at the primitive landscape where the tale was put together. This is not the dimension of morals but the dimension of ethics. Of course, the former is the work of education and religion, while the latter dimension is that with which psychoanalysis concerns itself.

In a session of psychoanalysis, we may encounter something mysterious, hostile, and horrible. It may be the unrepresentable, like the face of Levinas or “the real” of Jacques Lacan, that we encounter there. It is psychoanalysis that welcomes such an uncanny thing.

In order to lure the unrepresentable, psychoanalysts give themselves over totally to the space of transference. It is a space of Eros, reconstructed between analyst and patient. Given this space, the patient talks and talks, and unexpectedly, in the middle of talking, he is assaulted by what is not to be named. Of course, we cannot directly understand “the real,” but it has an effect on its own.

So the Lacanian psychoanalyst would never offer his patients an interpretation that reveals the meanings of the unconscious. He does not aim naively at reassuring his patient or at stabilizing such an unquiet situation immediately by providing his interpretation, like an explanation. Rather, he cuts off the session and brings it to an end in order to impress on his patients deeply the effect of that impossible encounter.¹⁴ Then the session of psychoanalysis is over, but without this ending, unconditional hospitality would never be precipitated. Like Derrida’s words “*pas d’hospitalité*,” the negation of hospitality is at the same time the beginning of hospitality. In this sense, the practice of psychoanalysis is also the practice of hospitality, which will be one of the opportunities of the birth of new subject.

¹⁴ This is a Lacanian technique “variable-length psychoanalytic session.” Lacan, Jacques, «Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse (1953)», in *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966.