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The Body is Never Just Flesh

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The following Research Reflection is part of CSWR's ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

On March 4, 1771, two Japanese physicians—Sugita Gempaku and Maeno Ryōtaku—observed a dissection. The subject was an old woman executed due to some unnamed but presumably egregious crime. Each of her organs laid out before them, the physicians compared what they saw to the illustrations in a Dutch anatomical atlas. The corpse and its organs bore little resemblance to how Japanese texts rendered the human form. A different vision and division of the body emerged.

Decades later, Sugita recounted the event in his 1815 *Rangaku Kotohajime* (The Beginning of Dutch Studies), ultimately inaugurating the myth that the 1771 dissection marked a watershed in Japan's medical history and signaled its encounter with scientific modernity. No serious history of Japanese medicine fails to invoke this paradigm-shifting moment, often arguing this surgical scalpel severed empirical knowledge from the inherited cosmologies of Buddhist medicine, Chinese tradition, even metaphysics.

The conventional narrative leaves a lot out. Sugita's translation choices from Dutch anatomical terms into Japanese undercut accounts of complete epistemic rupture. Western somatic science did not automatically secularize the body in Japan. The flesh was already contested before Sugita's anatomical observations. Unstable corporeal, epistemological, and linguistic movements flowed through the therapeutic landscape of Edo Japan (1603-1867). The autopsy table didn't settle debates but intensified them.

The dissection was not exactly novel. Cutting up human bodies was long frowned upon in Japan, but Buddhist monks and doctors long before Sugita were attentive to corporeality. Holding tantric commitments to esoteric cosmologies of healing, Shingon Buddhists were keen observers of organic matter, meditating upon living bodies and their interiors as revealed in decay, from initial bloating to bones to dust. Thirty years before Sugita's famed post-mortem, Negoro Tōshuku, who belonged to a lineage of Shingon Buddhist ophthalmologists, produced a detailed morphological treatise in 1741, *Jinshin renkotsu shinkei-zu* (True Shape of Human Bones), and he did so by observing decomposing corpses.

The idea for dissection also came to Sugita from a prior physician. In 1759, Yamawaki Tōyō published *Zōshi* (Record of the Viscera). Yamawaki is mostly encountered in footnotes. He is rarely cast as central to medical history, perhaps because after conducting a pioneering autopsy, he suggested his own findings vindicated not European anatomy, but a clinical tradition rooted in classical Chinese texts. Many contemporaries shared this viewpoint later known as Kanpō, a therapeutic system emphasizing maintenance of health through dynamic balance of *kei*, vital energy.

Sugita himself in 1774 asserted the significance of vital energy in *Kaitai Shinsbo* (New Book of Anatomy). For instance, it translated the Dutch word for nerves (*zenuwen*) by creating a new Kanpō-inflected term *shinkei* 神経, consisting of the characters *shin* and *kei*. *Shin* is a character meaning

“deity,” “spirit,” or “ghost.” The term’s longstanding technical usage in Chinese medicine refers to the spirit that governs consciousness, emotion, and vital functions. The character *kei* describes the meridian systems that carried *kei* through living tissue. *Shinkei* means “divine threads,” “spirit channels,” even “spectral currents.”

Far from erasing older epistemologies, the new term suggests nerves could be both physical structures and spiritual conduits. This translation was no anomaly. *Kaitai Shinsho* routinely juxtaposes European anatomical engravings with terms cobbled from existing Japanese healing traditions. Empirical medicine and inherited metaphysical frameworks were not incommensurable paradigms, but entangled from the outset in Japan.

What actually severed modern clinical practice from older ways of knowing was state power. In 1873, German-trained Nagayo Sensai established the Bureau of Medical Affairs, launching a biopolitical, hygiene regime. By 1895, a new licensing law effectively outlawed all but Western biomedicine. It was paradigm shift—not by experimental discovery, but by political fiat.

Edo Japan held not one view of the body, but a plurality of competing, coexisting frameworks for sensing and rendering health. Buddhist clerics authored intricate treatises on herbal pharmacology and cataract surgery. Japanese Kanpō maintained a curative discipline relying on tactile surveillance rather than clinical visualization: Abdominal palpation and pulse reading offering a precise, diagnostic regime. To claim one framework triumphed for being “more scientific” ignores enduring and ongoing epistemic struggles and exchanges.

The same opened cadaver could support multiple interpretations. Sugita’s peers saw nerves; Kanpō doctors saw energetic-flows; Buddhist healers, karmic residue; Shinto revivalists, the fulfilment of divine prophecy. The human frame was a battleground. The conflict was not between science versus superstition but between divergent knowledge systems. This history still matters, for the body is never just flesh. It is a surface of inscription, a site where power and meaning entwine.

Anatomy in 1771 wasn’t simply discovered. It was translated, absorbed, resisted, and made to serve competing metaphysical visions. Every nerve could *also* be a spectral current in an occult physiology whose history reveals how bodies are known but also how they are made.

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Bio: Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm is a historian and philosopher of the Human Sciences. He is currently Professor of Religion and Chair of Science & Technology Studies at Williams College. Storm received his Ph.D. from Stanford University, his MTS from Harvard University, and has held visiting positions at Princeton University, École Française d’Extrême-Orient in France, and Universität Leipzig in Germany. Storm prefers to frame his research program in terms of problematics pursued rather than territories mastered. But his research—conducted in ten different languages—has primarily concentrated on three key areas: Japanese Religions, European Intellectual History (including theosophy, esotericism, and magic), and the broader field of Theory. The common thread to his scholarship has been decentering received narratives about “religion” and “science.”

Storm is the author of numerous articles and book chapters in English, French, and Japanese; several standalone translations from Japanese; and three monographs—the award-winning *The Invention of Religion in*

Japan (2012), *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (2017), as well as *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021), all published by University of Chicago Press. A fourth monograph, *The Genealogy of Genealogy: Foucault, Nietzsche, History, Philosophy, and Race*, is currently out for review.
