Animals that Have Become Iconographic Symbols: Wolves as Symbols and the Perception of their Form

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Nearly a century has passed since the Japanese wolf disappeared from the Japanese islands. Nevertheless, there seems to be no end to the stories by people claiming to have seen a wolf with their own eyes, and there has even been a proposal to reintroduce wolves as a method of preventing damage to agriculture and forestry caused by deer, which has been reported all over Japan. To understand the relationship between human beings and animals, it is important to clarify this connection between wolves and the Japanese people. With this in mind, I conducted a study of folk stories associated with wolves.

In this paper, in addition to traditional folklore materials, I took a new approach and used iconographic materials. Through these materials, I examined how human beings have visualized and symbolized the form of the wolf. I believe that an analysis of iconographic wolves leads to a more profound understanding of the history of the interaction between the Japanese people and wolves.

Specifically, I conducted my study by dividing the iconographic materials into three categories: religious; related to fine arts; and related to the study of medicinal flora/fauna, and natural history. As a result, I detected a tendency to emphasize the strength and mysteriousness of wolves in the religious group, realistic portrayals as well as beautifying elements in the fine arts group and in the group related to flora/fauna and natural history, depictions of wild dogs (mountain dogs) and wolves together as well as a differentiation between the two. In chronological terms, the "wolf" first appeared as a symbol of strength and mystery, and a little later the existence of actual wolves began to be recognized, and then, forms that differed from real wild dogs and wolves emerged through the study of medicinal flora/fauna.

In traditional folklore, the size of the mouth, the glint in the eyes, and the color of the wolf's fur were all symbolized. Also, because there is very little in traditional folklore about the form of the wolf, I focused upon situations where human beings had contact with wolves as well as the existence of wolf illustrations in Volume I (for the second, third and fourth terms) of the "Jinjo Shogaku Shushin-sho" (Everyday Ethics for Elementary Schools) from the Meiji period and later.