

**Are Iris Murdoch's foxes Japanese?
Kitsuné myth and Zen Buddhism
in *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Message to the Planet***

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This paper advances the hypothesis that Iris Murdoch was making use of Japanese *kitsuné* myth in her references to foxes in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, *The Message to the Planet*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and perhaps also, more fleetingly, in earlier works such as *Henry and Cato* and *The Black Prince*.

The Philosopher's Pupil, like a number of Murdoch's novels, makes a number of references to Japan: Stella's father in Tokyo has given her a *netsuke* collection; Rozanov has a Japanese doctor; there is a Japanese vase in the Slipper House. The novel is

also haunted by foxes and their mysterious and sometimes sinister presence in the garden of Bellmain is associated with the appearance of a female ghost in a ginkgo tree and culminates in a violent confrontation between Alex and her servant Ruby, who, superstitious about the foxes, has arranged for them to be gassed; they are however reprieved due to the incompetence of the local council in their attempt to eradicate them.

I argue that the apparently distinct threads of the fox theme and the Japanese theme in the novel are connected. Firstly, through the archetype of the lost fox-mother of *kitsuné* myth which Murdoch might have encountered through Junichirô Tanizachi's 'Arrowroot' and which is instantiated in Tom McCaffrey's vision of his dead mother. Secondly, though another story of reprieved foxes in a 12th-century Japanese folktale which Murdoch would have had access to through the version of Royall Tyler: that of the householder, Yasumichi, who is determined to eradicate the mischievous foxes in his house, but who relents after the fox patriarch appears to him in a dream.

The connection between the fox and Japanese spirituality is reinforced in *A Message to the Planet*, another fox-haunted novel, in which I believe Murdoch is referencing the wild fox koan of *The Gateless Gate* (*Mumonkan*): Marcus Vallar is described both as someone who 'is a koan' and who dies the 'death of a fox' (he in fact attempts to gas himself as the foxes in *The Philosopher's Pupil* would have been gassed.) One philosophical aspect of this koan is whether one should deny the power of causality; I believe it is no coincidence that both the novels discussed here end with deaths with ambiguous causes, and in the case of Vallar with the question as to whether his death was completely out of the realm of ordinary physical causation.

Finally, I argue that in *The Message to the Planet* and *The Book and the Brotherhood* we have references to the Edo legend of the evil nine-tailed fox, Tamamo-no-mae, and that the standing stones in these novels can be seen as *sesshoseki*, or Japanese foxes in disguise.