

DEATH AND SOCIAL ORDER IN TOKUGAWA JAPAN: BUDDHISM, ANTI-CHRISTIANITY, AND THE DANKA SYSTEM. By Nam-lin Hur. Harvard University Asia Center 2007. Pp. 409. \$55.00. ISBN: 0-067-40253-2.

Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan is a very important book providing a detailed explanation of a vital part of early modern Japanese Buddhism that goes a long way to putting in perspective how the religious tradition functions in the contemporary world. To put in context the contributions of the book, it can be noted that visitors to Japan who are curious about the role of Buddhism in relation to modern society generally come away with a mixed impression. On the one hand, the presence of temples is pervasive throughout most urban and countryside areas, and this also means that there are many examples of festivals and rituals on display, creating a sense of vibrancy. At the same time, observers often get the feeling that Buddhism is not as spiritually dynamic an institution as might be expected. Conversations with Japanese people can lead one to feel that they have little interest or enthusiasm for traditional religiosity. In many cases, they appear to lack familiarity with some of the basic elements of religious doctrine or practice, which seem to be known only to relatively few priests, scholars, and ritual specialists.

Nam-lin Hur's new book, his second on Tokugawa- (or Edo-) era Japanese Buddhism following *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*,¹ shows that, on closer investigation, the disconnect between appearance and reality is due in large part to the pervasive influence of what can be called the Japanese Buddhist "way of death." This refers to the widespread use of Buddhism in funerary customs as well as memorial ceremonies for deceased relatives or familial ancestors. Much of a typical Buddhist temple's activity revolves around serving families by providing funeral rituals and helping to facilitate other rites such as the *O-Bon* (or Ghost) festival along with cyclical visits to graves or additional observances and ways of commemorating the dead.

1. Nam-lin Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* 185 (Harv. U. Asia Ctr. 2000).

A seminal study on the topic cited by Hur is Tamamuro Taijō's *Sōshiki Bukkyō* (Funerary Buddhism),² which highlighted the extent to which Buddhism was infused with funerary practices. A number of recent works in English have covered aspects of this topic, including Stephen Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*; and Andrew Bernstein, *Modern Passings: Death Rites, Politics, and Social Change in Imperial Japan*.³ These works on funerary Buddhism, along with the satirical film by famed director Itami Juzō, *O-Sōshiki* (The Funeral), which lampoons avaricious Buddhist priests who are driven in limousines to funeral services where they solicit large donations, help to illustrate why Buddhism creates an impression that it is lacking in spiritual depth. A contemporary Japanese observer comments,

The first thing that probably comes to mind when you think "Buddhism" is funerals. Yet the original aim of Buddhism is to spread widely the teachings of the Buddha. It is definitely not the performance of funerals. But, today isn't it the case that through funerals, memorial services, and visits to graves, people often come into contact with temples, priests, and, therefore, with Buddhism?⁴

Hur for the first time offers an in-depth study of the origins and development of funerary Buddhism in relation to the temple-affiliation system or *danka seidō*, by which every Japanese family in the early modern period was required by the *shogunate* to receive a temple certification or *terauke*. This system is often misleadingly referred to as equivalent to the establishment of the "parish," since it involves the connections of religious followers with particular temples. However, Hur points out that although the *danka* system resembles the network of parishes in Catholicism in that both require all parties to establish ties and form a congregation with a house of worship, the main difference is that in Japanese Buddhism, there is no strict geographical requirement for membership as affiliations cut across territorial lines and are based on other factors.

For Hur, what defined the *danka* system at the time of its inception was its role in the performance of funerals, which from the start was advantageous for turning a profit. "So what, in the final analysis,

2. Tamamuro Taijō, *Sōshiki Bukkyō* (Funerary Buddhism) (Daihōrinkakv 1963).

3. Stephen Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation* (U. Haw. Press 2006) and Andrew Bernstein, *Modern Passings: Death Rites, Politics, and Social Change in Imperial Japan* (U. Haw. Press 2006).

4. Covell, *id.* at 172.

provided a majority of Buddhist temples—regardless of their sectarian affiliation, prestige, and religious reputation—with financial stability?” Hur asks rhetorically. “The answer,” he responds, “is simple: death.” Services for the dead in the Tokugawa era (and still today) generated a high volume of income, largely through donations to individual temples and priests, which went a long way toward supporting and sustaining the Buddhist institutional structure. In fact, the income received from funerals has been the primary source of funding for the vast majority of temples in Japan. In explicating this topic, Hur shows that the *danka* system was crucial for the proliferation of temples in the city of Tokyo (Edo) as well as other areas in Japan in that it was inseparably related to profit-making funerary Buddhism.

Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan is especially useful for the way it deals with the main Buddhist sects in relation to other religions in Japan, particularly the foreign cult of Christianity (which is referred to in Japanese pronunciation as “Kirishitan”), the native practice of ancestor worship, the indigenous rites of Shinto, the revival of national learning in the Kokugaku movement, and the other main import from China, Neo-Confucianism. The book is very effective in showing how the *danka* system represented a pan-Buddhist approach encompassing the two sects, Tendai and Shingon, that were established in the classical or Heian era, as well as the sects that became prominent in the medieval or Kamakura era, Zen, Nichiren, Jōdo, and Jōdo Shin. However, the latter school’s practices tended to be an exception because of its distinctive approach to death and the afterlife which emphasized “biographies of those reborn in the Pure Land” (*ōjōden*). These monks were less engaged in enforcing Tokugawa ethical policies than in promoting edifying tales stressing individual’s spiritual path. Nevertheless, the *danka* system was important in promoting the institutional success, as well as excesses in fundraising, of all of the Buddhist sects. While there were numerous rivalries and contests regarding jurisdictions and legitimacy, for the most part, intra-Buddhist conflict paled in comparison to the unity of the Buddhist tradition in consolidating and transforming the practice of ancestor veneration in opposition to other local and outside religions.

The book’s main thesis pertains to the role of the *danka* system in offsetting the intrusion of Christianity that occurred in Japan beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. Toward the end of the century, the warlord Nobunaga took an anti-Buddhist approach and destroyed a number of important temples which he considered a threat to his consolidation of power after several centuries of constant feuding and civil warfare

between conflicting political factions. Nobunaga's successor Hideyoshi, however, made an accord with Buddhism, partly as a way of self-legitimation since his associations with the cultural elite were a way of disguising his humble origins. By the start of the seventeenth century, Tokugawa Ieyasu, who rose to power as the first shogun after winning the Battle of Sekigahara, decided to use Buddhist temples as the main tool of his anti-Christianity campaign reflecting his determination to stamp out all traces of the foreign cult because of its subversive influences. The entire population of Japan was subjected to the *danka* system without exception, because the *shogunate* saw this as a means of eliminating Christianity from the shores of Japan through each temple's ability to oversee behavior and thereby suppress subversion and punish any lack of fidelity to the state. According to Hur,

It should be noted . . . that the *danka* system was not really a legal "system" or "institution" per se; rather, it was a custom manipulated and entrenched by Buddhist temples, which capitalized on the anti-Christian policy of the Tokugawa *bakufu*.
(13)

Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan also deals with the question of how Buddhism, once it saw the advantages of the *danka* system for maintaining institutional stability despite the apparent loss of spiritual vitality, was able to maintain a stranglehold on the prerogative to provide funeral services. This held true although there was some sense of rivalry with Shinto-affiliated National Learning (school of thought in that era) scholars like Hirata Atsutane, in addition to strenuous opposition from Neo-Confucian thinkers like Kumazawa Banzan who argued that greed and corruption were characteristic of the Buddhist approach. Because of its long history of involvement with death and funerary practices in India and China before it became a force in Japan, Buddhism was able to outbid Shinto, so to speak, in gaining the right to perform funerals. The indigenous tradition was seemingly more connected to native ancestor veneration, but its practitioners had always expressed an abhorrence of death as a form of pollution and never really competed with Buddhism in this regard. However, as Chapter 13 ("Shinto Funeral Movements in the *Bakumatsu*") and Chapter 14 ("Shinto Funerals in Early Meiji Japan") show, by the end of the Tokugawa era, Shinto tried to become involved in funerary practices by, for example, rationalizing linkages between individual family lineages and the national polity.

Convincingly Hur explains the multiple problems with the *danka* system from a social-historical standpoint, yet he also evenhandedly

shows the limitations of the argument by Tsuji Zennosuke and other twentieth century scholars that the system is emblematic of a decline or decadence (*daraku*) in early modern Buddhism. Hur maintains that the Tsuji approach fosters a stereotypical view based on “hackneyed anti-Buddhist rhetoric” that lacks nuance reflecting the complexity of conditions in the Tokugawa era. (272) Throughout the book, Hur’s writing is impeccably researched, well reasoned, and neutral in its assessment of the full implications of Buddhist practices, thus avoiding the twin pitfalls of extreme or disdainful rejection and uncritical or bland description.

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