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*Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the
Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*

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A Review of *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*

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Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism. By Mark Michael Rowe. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, xv + 258 pages, ISBN 978-0-226-73015-8 (paper), \$29.00.

Mark Rowe's account of how traditional burial forms are being transformed in Japan provides an excellent lens through which to view the state of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. The book revolves around the argument that temple Buddhism in Japan is fundamentally dependent on the bonds (*en*) that bind together family members, ancestors, and temples. Rowe shows that due to factors such as urbanization and the unraveling of the nuclear family in recent decades, these bonds are facing new challenges. For example, those with no offspring to tend their graves after they are gone fear becoming permanently abandoned (*muen*). On the other hand, temples also fear desertion by their parishioners who chafe at the prohibitive cost of interment at temple complexes. Despite such challenges to traditional notions of burial, the bonds which bind the dead to the living remain surprisingly strong. Instead of new social pressures resulting in such bonds being broken as one might expect, Rowe notes that these bonds

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are in the process of being situated within a new communal context. As Rowe explains, such changes herald the not insignificant departure of temple Buddhism from its traditional parishioner base (*danka*).

In his introduction, Rowe provides the key historical facts which have contributed to this state of events. The ground Rowe covers here provides the familiar narrative of how funerary Buddhism emerged in the Tokugawa period and eventually turned into the funerary business that it is today. However, although Rowe reviews the facts which led temples to be financially dependent on funerary income, he correctly seeks to challenge the notion popularized by Tamamuro Taijō and others that this can be understood one-sidedly in terms of the “decline” of Buddhism into a funerary business. As he notes, it is hard to dispute that the loss of agricultural holdings for temples led funerary rituals to become the financial bedrock of contemporary Buddhism. It is equally evident that the respect for temples held by parishioners underwent a significant decline as new generations raised in a commoditized society increasingly questioned the high price of funerary rituals. Yet as Rowe shows, this narrative overlooks the continued demand in the contemporary period to be buried in a way that guarantees memorialization. Particularly noteworthy in this chapter is Rowe’s attention to the Meiji period when the Japanese government attempted to codify the Japanese household (*ie*) by designating the head of the household as the inheritor of their ancestor’s grave. Rowe argues that this served to ensconce the ideal of the extended family in the current civil code as well as in the popular imagination. Thus, it was in large part this codification of grave inheritance that helped maintain the strong bonds between the dead, the temple, and the living. The resiliency of these bonds, forged in the Meiji period, coupled with disenchantment with the contemporary funerary status quo, helped set the stage for what he argues are signs of a post-*danka* form of Japanese Buddhism.

So what does a post-*danka* form of Buddhism look like? As Rowe documents, eternal memorial graves (*kuonbo*) provide individuals

without descendants or who otherwise do not want a traditional grave a guarantee of memorial services being performed on their behalf for a set number of years by a third party. In chapters three and four, which form the heart of his study, Rowe delves into the details of these grave sites by introducing two fascinating case studies of “eternal memorial graves” found at Myokoji, a Nichiren temple in rural Niigata prefecture and at Tochoji, a Soto temple in central Tokyo. Drawing from interviews with families, priests, and his own field-observations, these two chapters provide an in-depth analysis that looks beneath the novelty of such graves to show how “eternal memorial graves involve an innovative reworking of traditional notions of community by certain temple priests” (58). These two chapters provide a wealth of information on the process by which eternal memorial graves came to be and how this opened the door for non-*danka* members to participate in a new kind of temple community. Though on the surface such graves seem to indicate the weakening of traditional bonds between the living and the dead, Rowe argues that these new graves retain the essential ethos of memorial rites but simply locate them in a post-*danka* community. Thus, despite the demographic pressures that have pushed traditional burial forms to their limit, Rowe argues that these new grave sites provide a new form of community. This is not unlike the way new religions or corporate hierarchies have established new communities, which in turn replaced traditional village structures in contemporary Japan (58). In short, Rowe states that by shifting the burden of grave maintenance and memorial offerings to a third party, eternal memorial graves could be signaling the end of the traditional family grave in Japan and the *danka* system it supports (67).

Equally fascinating in this volume is chapter five where Rowe examines a more radical alternative to traditional graves by discussing the new burial form of scattering ashes. However, he notes that despite the initial flurry of media attention, this mode of burial still remains too radical for most Japanese. Finally, in chapter six, Rowe brings to light the doctrinal implications of funerary Buddhism as he examines how

sectarian research centers have grappled with societal changes and the emergence of new funerary forms. This chapter is a particularly interesting contribution in that it shows how these research centers, which influence the discourse of funerary Buddhism, deserve to be studied as fieldsites unto themselves. A new project on this neglected topic would be very welcome.

Although novel burial forms have been duly noted in the Japanese press, Rowe's key contribution in this first full-length study of eternal memorial graves is in looking beneath the rise of such novel burial forms to observe that despite significant departures in external appearance, the bonds which drive the demand for a certain kind of burial and even the ritual form, for now, have not changed (75). As he notes, the efforts of priests to form new kinds of temple communities that are based on participation and choice rather than on obligation are certainly a departure from the past (86). However, the essential desire to avoid becoming *muen* has not attenuated amongst those seeking burial. Although, initially, significant attention was paid in the press to those who chose to have their ashes scattered in lieu of a traditional burial, rejecting memorial rites altogether still remains too radical an idea for most Japanese. Rather, the demand to be memorialized, and to faithfully memorialize one's ancestors has remained strong enough to lead to the creation of a new kind of community to meet this demand. Into this gap have stepped charismatic priests who are themselves seeking to offset the lack of growth in the numbers of their *danka*. This picture provides an interesting counterargument to those who have written off contemporary funerary Buddhism as stagnant or as even compromising its doctrinal tenets. As Rowe shows, the spread of eternal memorial graves shows funerary Buddhism as a consistent, vibrant force, still seeking ways to help the living assist the dead as it has done for centuries.

Rowe's interviews with informants in the two case studies he presents also help reveal the subtleties and complex nature of burial

choices in Japan. For example, one informant casts her choice of being buried in an eternal memorial grave (so as to not join her husband in his family grave) as an issue of control. Yet people are drawn to eternal memorial graves for different reasons. As Rowe notes in the case of *En no Kai*, the majority of those (58 percent) seeking an eternal memorial grave desired to do so to avoid burdening their descendants, while only about a fifth (17 percent) sought out such a grave because they had no descendants to care for the grave (130). Although there is no single answer to the question of why eternal memorial graves have grown in popularity, Rowe provides a helpful outline of some the factors which have contributed to the movement.

The complex nature of burial choices that Rowe uncovers also raises many basic questions. For example, it is curious that Meiji efforts to create a family state should have formed such a tenacious bond between the living and the dead—a bond that could survive over a century of societal change. The contemporary Japanese family and gender roles have come a long way from the Meiji period. Notions about work and career are being challenged by younger generations and Japanese increasingly identify themselves as non-religious. Amidst this sea of change, why does rejecting memorial rites still remain too radical an idea for most Japanese? Why are these bonds so strong in the first place? Although Rowe demonstrates the real fear amongst his informants of becoming *muen*, one wonders if it is only the Meiji period codification of grave inheritance laws that has cast such a long shadow into the present. Can we suspect that there are other factors that play a part in maintaining these bonds besides the extended family or *ie* ideal? Equally baffling is the fear of abandonment that Rowe documents in the face of declining religiosity in Japan as a whole. Do contemporary Japanese really believe that if no one tends their grave they will end up wandering the earth as haunted and haunting spirits? Rowe mentions in passing that this paradox cuts to the heart of any study of contemporary Japanese religiosity (93). Unfortunately for the reader, he does not fully elaborate on how his valuable fieldwork may help resolve these

important questions.

Stylistically, Rowe presents his fieldwork to the reader with clarity and his analysis is thankfully free of burdensome jargon, this also makes the book ideal for those who are uninitiated into the complexities of Japanese funerary customs. Chapter one in particular provides an excellent overview of how Tokugawa period funerary Buddhism has transitioned into the present and would be ideal reading for any undergraduate seeking a concise discussion of the subject. Furthermore, by relying on the active voice in many sections, Rowe's writing also lends itself to helping the reader feel closer to the author's informants as the ethnographic material is presented.

In sum, this book provides a wealth of ethnographic material on the transformation of contemporary burial forms accompanied by insightful commentary that looks beneath the novelty of eternal memorial graves to identify important changes and continuities in contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Although the extent to which eternal memorial graves and alternative burial forms will continue to spread in Japan remains to be seen, the author makes it clear that funerary Buddhism is not quite dead yet.