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*Narratives of Sorrow and Dignity: Japanese Women,
Pregnancy Loss, and Modern Rituals of Grieving*

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A Review of *Narratives of Sorrow and Dignity: Japanese Women, Pregnancy Loss, and Modern Rituals of Grieving*

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Narratives of Sorrow and Dignity: Japanese Women, Pregnancy Loss, and Modern Rituals of Grieving. By Bardwell L. Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, xvii + 410 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-994213-8 (cloth), \$115.00.

Bardwell Smith's *Narratives of Sorrow and Dignity* makes good on a promise made fifteen years prior to its publication. Articles published as far back as 1999 (by Smith's early collaborator Elizabeth Harrison) made reference to a forthcoming book-length manuscript on the subject of *mizuko kuyō*, the so-called "water child" memorials performed in Japan following experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. In recent years, scholars working in this area of research had started to believe that the project had fallen by the wayside. Thus, when *Narratives of Sorrow and Dignity* came out in 2013, it was welcomed by folks interested in the issue.

Smith's research stretches back to 1984, before the publication of William LaFleur's *Liquid Life* (Princeton University Press, 1994) and Helen

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Hardacre's *Marketing the Menacing Fetus* (University of California Press, 1999), the two most well-known English-language books on the subject. These books took crosswise approaches with LaFleur arguing that *mizuko kuyō* has deep cultural and religious roots in Japan and the potential to mediate abortion controversies, and Hardacre countering that *mizuko kuyō* was a recent innovation that preys on women's vulnerability after a pregnancy loss and demonizes lost fetuses. Smith sees his own work as "not just another book about *mizuko kuyō*" (xiii), and he attends to the critiques and insights of LaFleur's and Hardacre's projects (and several other works) as he puts forward a "case study" analyzing complex cultural processes at work in Japanese responses to pregnancy loss. The careful precision of his language demonstrates that he is keen to avoid the polemics that often surround the subject.

The book's opening chapter sets the stage for the multifaceted analysis that follows. It touches upon issues including when *mizuko kuyō* first started gaining positive and negative public attention; insights from Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu on cultural production and women's agency in pregnancy loss rituals; and reproductive politics in contemporary Japan, both broadly speaking and in relation to recent ethnographic studies focused on couples facing reproductive challenges.

What follows in Parts One, Two, and Three develops with nuance and depth the issues introduced in that first chapter. Part One analyzes *mizuko* services, the temples and priests that offer them, and the individuals who participate in the rituals. Chapter Two's deep dive into the "Architectural, Iconographic, and Doctrinal Features of *Mizuko Kuyō*" offers a comprehensive account of the symbols and beliefs invoked in the services, including Buddhist teachings and historical Japanese precursors to the contemporary practice. Toward the end of that chapter and moving into the next, the focus shifts to ethnographic data gathered by Smith via questionnaires and interviews at temples offering *mizuko kuyō*. Beyond his own ethnography, Smith taps into large-scale Japanese sociological research on *mizuko kuyō* in order to provide both statistical and

narrative evidence of trends in attitudes towards and reasons for participation in the rites. This part of the book felt dated since the ethnographic findings came largely from research dating back to the mid-1980s when Smith initiated the project. Throughout the book he attempts to bring that data up to date with more recent research, but nevertheless, a significant ethnographic burden is placed on data that is over twenty years old.

Part Two goes on to explore changing notions of gender roles, motherhood, and sexuality in Japan from the Meiji period through the contemporary era. It also addresses cultural understandings of the *mizuko* in relation to other honored dead. The issue of lost *mizuko* as ancestors (thus in need of attention and care along with one's other ancestors) is complicated due to their betwixt and between status. Smith offers a detailed look into *mizuko* rites situated within the context of other Buddhist services for ancestors and the temple economies that depend upon them, and he draws out additional complications of ancestor worship for women by bringing in feminist critiques of the process.

Part Three recounts a detailed dharma talk from a temple priest that articulates the connection between the form and function of *mizuko* services and Buddhist doctrine. Smith then expands beyond the Japanese focus of his book to take into account American Buddhist pregnancy loss memorialization, particularly Jeff Wilson's *Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and the work of Yvonne Rand, a Buddhist priest who has been doing *mizuko* services in the US since the early 1970s. The book concludes by zooming out further to take a broad look at rituals of mourning and grief. Following the conclusion of Part Three, the volume also includes a number of helpful appendices, such as a translation of the legend of *Sai-no-Kawara*, the limbo-like place *mizuko* await rebirth either in this realm or in the Pure Land.

As I alluded to above, the downside of this volume is what one might expect from a project that was thirty years in the making: data

that at times feels out of date. For instance, the Japanese sociological data from Part Two comes from surveys and interviews conducted in the mid-1980s (though much of it was not published until the late 1990s). Smith's more recent interviews from the early 2000s compensate somewhat for the age of some of the original data, but still, when aspects of the argument were based primarily on those older interviews, I could not help but wonder if that evidence held up to the test of time. Of course, the flipside of this critique is that Smith's work is essentially the only English-language scholarship that spans such a lengthy period of time.

Perhaps this reliance on older data would imply that Smith's book is better understood (as he somewhat suggests) as a case study of the state of *mizuko kuyō* in the '80s and '90s, and not as an account of the contemporary practice. Nevertheless, the rich weaving together of this older data with insights drawn from more recent scholarly writings on Japanese women, society, motherhood, temple life, and ancestor rites made the trade-off worth it for me as a reader. Indeed, one challenge for individuals beginning research into the subject is that it is difficult to feel like one has a holistic grasp of *mizuko kuyō* considering its contested history and place in Japanese religious studies. This book helps meliorate that concern in its efforts to be broadly focused, balanced, and reflexively aware of the critiques facing both practitioners of and scholars studying *mizuko kuyō*. In short, it was worth the wait.

Scholars and graduate students of Japanese religion and women will appreciate Smith's careful work and nuanced tone in this volume, and parts of it would be appropriate for use in the undergraduate classroom due to Smith's easy-to-read writing style.