

**Nam-lin Hur. *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System***

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Nam-lin Hur's *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System* is full of interesting ironies and paradoxes concerning the Tokugawa state and its relationship to Buddhism. Just as an introductory example, he notes that Buddhism was not a state religion in the Edo period; indeed, the state took several measures to curb the influence of Buddhism in society. At the same time, however, the state, through its anti-Christian policy, was eminently responsible for allowing Buddhist temples to flourish and even went so far as to make it extremely difficult for a family to remove itself from the temple registries. These types of paradoxes are found throughout the book so that not only has Hur written a superb history of the *Danka* system in Edo Japan, he has also, as academics like to say, problematized the role of Buddhism within the Tokugawa state.

Hur recognizes that the term *danka* has traditionally been translated as "temple parish system," but finds that translation unsatisfying. He suggests instead "funerary patronage," largely to avoid the connotation that the relationship between temple and families was based on geography. In reality, the relationship was one that often crisscrossed a city or village, as each family chose which temple it patronized. Furthermore, the relationship was largely based on what Hur calls "familial death rituals and ancestral rites of oblation." The relationship was very much based on the funerary rites as well as the subsequent rituals of commemoration that the temples provided to families. This had the interesting side effect of "creating" ancestors, rather than simply commemorating their deaths. These ancestors served the function of protecting the family and therefore the rituals became exceedingly important. This leads to yet another paradox: Although it was a Shinto cosmology that provided the framework for ancestral spirits protecting the household, it was

largely the Buddhist temples that actually provided the rituals and services to create those ancestors.

The *danka* system really rose to prominence in society with the Tokugawa policy of temple certification. This policy forced every family to obtain a certification from a Buddhist temple stating that they were not Christian. This was part of the severe persecution of Christianity that began in the first half of the seventeenth century and continued, at least rhetorically, throughout the Tokugawa regime. Hur notes that even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, long after Christianity ceased to be a real issue in Tokugawa society, these temple certifications were required in order for individuals to be free from suspicion of being a Christian. It was this requirement, in conjunction with the funerary rites that were so important to Japanese families, that allowed the *danka* system to flourish and allowed Buddhist temples in the Edo period to be financially viable, even without explicit state support.

Hur spends a great deal of the book explaining in minute detail the workings of the temple certification system, the rituals used in the various funerary practices in Buddhist temples, the role of ancestors in promoting the household in Tokugawa society, and the legal ramifications of belonging to the *danka* system. For example, Hur notes that it was exceptionally difficult to leave the *danka* relationship with a temple once that relationship had been initiated. This was largely because the original temple had to agree to provide its assent when a family wanted to leave. Naturally, temples were not always entirely obliging. Furthermore, there were instances in which Shinto priests wanted to obtain permission to perform Shinto rituals rather than Buddhist ones, but this also proved difficult as only Buddhist priests were authorized to inspect and certify a death. Thus, as Hur notes, death was really only "legal" in the *danka* system! While this amount of detail is quite impressive and demonstrates an extraordinary amount of first-rate research, the depth of specificity can become tedious as one is treated to page after page of technical information. It is a credit to the author that despite this detail, he never allows his reader to lose sight of the main thesis of the book.

Perhaps the most important contribution that this book makes to the scholarship on early modern Japan is that it ties together seemingly disparate

aspects of Tokugawa society into a coherent narrative centered on the *danka* system. For example, the author connects the Tokugawa attempt to eradicate Christianity with the flourishing of Buddhist temples, even though Edo never actively declared Buddhism to have any official status in society. Hur also relates the structure of the Japanese household to the *danka* system through his discussion of “creating” the ancestors through the rituals provided by the Buddhist temples. In this respect, the Japanese notions of filial piety take on special significance, and are directed not simply to one’s own parents and grandparents, as in China and Korea, but to the household in general. In another case of paradox, Hur notes that it was possible for a son to remove his father from the head of the family, an eminently un-filial act in China, if it was for the good of the household. And finally, Hur is able to tie together institutional Buddhism, as represented by the local temples that performed funerary rites and religious certification, with social and religious control by the state. It is perhaps the ultimate irony that Buddhist temples, which were not officially recognized as state institutions, should come to be such agents of state power. Hur points out that through the temple certification system, Edo came to exercise a much greater amount of control in the various domains than has been previously recognized. In the end, despite the intricate and often mind-boggling amount of detail presented in this study, Nam-lin Hur has managed to write a fascinating and far-reaching study that does not simply relate the “history” of Tokugawa period funerary Buddhism, but rather explains why (and how) Buddhism in general, and the *danka* system in particular, was of such vital importance in perpetuating Tokugawa control for more than two hundred and fifty years.

**Jonathan E. Zwicker. *Practices of the Sentimental Imagination: Melodrama, the Novel, and the Social Imaginary in Nineteenth-Century Japan***

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During a class discussion recently a student who had been in Japan during the summer raised a ques-

tion. “Why,” he asked, “are Japanese television dramas so *sentimental*?” The disparaging tone he added to that final word led to an immediate attack by several other students—j-drama fans—who launched their own melodramatic defense of the genre. He eventually backed down, but the echoes of that exchange continue to haunt me, especially in the context of the nineteenth century.

What, from our current realism-craving culture, are we to make of all the excess, of all those swooning Victorian ladies and their resolute-yet-tearful suitors? Was it all an act, or an over-act, that somehow we, in our progressively restrained world, have (at long last) transcended? And, more to the point, what of their Japanese equivalents: those flushed, weeping maidens and their uniformed, sometimes-belligerent boyfriends?

This question is not mine alone. Peter Brooks raised it in 1976 in reference to Western literature of the nineteenth century, concluding that somehow the histrionic language of the stage found its way into the writing style of Balzac and Henry James.<sup>1</sup> More recently Ken Ito has addressed it in a late-Meiji Japanese context, seeing the flux of melodrama as a mirror reflecting the anxieties of a changing world, touchstones for real social problems that emerged in family, gender, and hierarchical relationships.<sup>2</sup> The book under review, Jonathan Zwicker’s *Practices of the Sentimental Imagination: Melodrama, the Novel, and the Social Imaginary in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, appeared two years before Professor Ito’s work, and in some respects anticipates and buttresses Ito’s conclusions even as it broaches new possibilities, including an answer to the puzzle of sentimentality in literature.

It is an impressive, eclectic work that seeks to reassess and reconfigure some of the major issues of literary modernity in Japan. Zwicker uses both close reading and broad surveys of literary success (in commercial terms) to challenge traditional notions of canon, tracing a genealogy of sentimental/melodramatic fiction across the “long nineteenth

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Ken K. Ito, *An Age of Melodrama: Family, Gender, and Social Hierarchy in the Turn-of-the-Century Japanese Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).