

The accompanying bibliography documents that the representation of Tokugawa religious phenomena in European-language scholarship advanced immensely during the last two decades of the twentieth century. For most of this period, intellectual history dominated the subfields of nativist, Confucian, and Buddhist studies--and its practitioners, regardless of their theoretical framework, focussed on the products of educated thinkers. In the meantime, however, boundaries have become more permeable in the increasingly interdisciplinary climate of today's academe. Students of early modern religion, especially those who study Buddhist-related phenomena, have begun to emphasize the social and economic significance of their materials, and many individual scholars across the subfields are now more appreciative of the ways in which diverse religious elements functioned interactively in specific Tokugawa contexts.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, scholars of Buddhism, on the one hand, and historians of Confucian or nativist culture, on the other, are in need of more interaction. To my mind, these academic groupings are more hard-edged than the interpretive communities hypothesized by Yamashita, which after all evolved from each other (allegedly). The modernization, tradition, new intellectual, and postmodern scholars whom Yamashita discusses at least tried to read each other's works, even when they disagreed intensely. It is true that Fish's notion of the interpretive community originally referred to groups or institutions that put forth a particular interpretation of a text, as opposed to a different interpretation of the same text by another community. It may be argued that Confucian, nativist, and Buddhist studies scholars (in both Japan and the West) are in fact reading different "texts," in which case Fish's term is inapplicable to their "communities." I am suggesting, however, that we reevaluate our concept of what constitutes a "Confucian text," a "Buddhist text," or a "nativist text"--and by extension, a Confucian, a Buddhist, or a nativist. Most educated persons in the Edo period were well-read in a number of canons and drew from them, even if reactively or inadvertently; the less-educated for their part were routinely exposed to multireligious vernacular and oral texts. The entire range of

intellectual and religious discourse of the period in question, regardless of the group with which each segment of it is conventionally associated, constitutes the larger text over which our interpretive communities should dispute.

**Nam-lin Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* (Harvard University Asia Centre, 2000)**

©Timon Screech, SOAS, University of London, and Sainsbury Institute

As Bashō lay on his sickbed in the spring of 1687, he heard the sound of a booming bell, and wondered, 'Is it Ueno? Is it Asakusa? (*Zokuminashiguri*)' He was not just hesitating between two temples, but between two entire socio-political constructions of Buddhism. The Ueno Kan'ei-ji had been built to match the Hieizan Enryaku-ji, and to make this clear it was located in a similar north-easterly direction, and bore the name of the era (*nengō*) of its foundation – as was rare in temple nomenclature. The Kan'ei-ji was home to a wealth of politically and institutionally important edifices, not least the Tōshō-gū, and [the] mausolea of about half the subsequent shoguns. Ueno was full of pomp and magnificence, if not exactly always fun. Its twin was the Shiba Zōjō-ji, which housed the other mausolea and a second Tōshō-gū.

The Asakusa Sensō-ji was, to use a vernacular appropriate to the flavor of the place, a different kettle of fish. The temple did have something to do with fish in fact, since it began as a place of veneration in 628, when two fishermen hauled up a Kannon statue and enshrined it there. The Sensō-ji thus long antedated the Kan'ei-ji whose era-name badge locked it clearly into the modern world of the Tokugawa regime (Kan'ei is 1624-44). The Sensō-ji's history, by contrast, was lost in legend and myth. The Tokugawa had patronised it directly for a time, and Ieyasu thought its holy image had assisted his victory at Sekigahara, but they soon shifted attention (in 1625) to the new sacred site then emerging in architectural glory.

Ueno and Asakusa, the Kan'ei-ji and the

Sensō-ji, were thus opposing pans on the balance of Edo Buddhism. They were (and are), though, not far apart geographically, since both were at the *kimon* of the Castle. The Zōjō-ji, being further away, at the *ura-kimon*, rather fell out of the equation. The institutions of the two north-eastern temples were also closely entwined. Ueno gained control of Asakusa. From 1685, it arrogated the power to nominate the Sensō-ji head, and when the Sensō-ji's often-bulging offertory boxes were emptied, they were emptied into the coffers of the Kan'ei-ji. Hur is very specific on financial matters, and supplies several useful tables.

As everyone who studies the period knows, the Sensō-ji acquired the homely name of 'Asakusa Kannon', and became a focus of disportment for the constricted Edo populace. Its proximity to the Yoshiwara after that pleasure quarter relocated in 1657, gave it more than a whiff of the secular, not to say the venal. Many was the man who claimed to be going to pray but found his steps moving involuntarily onwards. There were *misemono* and eating stands, and, we learn from Hur, 220 toothpick sellers by 1807 (more than double the 98 there some fifty years earlier) (p. 66). I guess you didn't go to the Yoshiwara with bits of fish hanging from your teeth, or perhaps there were other reasons for this concentration – Hur offers no opinion. In short, the Asakusa Kannon stood for a good time, but also for the possibility of a miracle that might change one's life, as it had changed Ieyasu's. The precinct was a place of infinite possibility, of which the freak shows, waterworks and rare foods were merely the this-worldly extensions of a larger cosmic scheme. The Asakusa Kannon offered no death rituals, which made it almost unique. Its sub-temples did perform funerals, and had *danka*, but the main temple did not. It was thus a place of the potential within the here-and-now.

Hur goes so far as to assert, "prayer patrons never bothered to attempt to understand the mechanisms of the prayer rituals that Sensōji offered them. What they wanted was material evidence – something that gave them tangible proof of Sensōji's religious fame and efficacy" (p. 40). This sounds like a false dichotomy to me, and although evidence for the one is provided in this book, I do not detect evidence for lack of the

other. Hur actually quotes very few comments from Edo sources (although there were have been plenty to chose from) of what people thought they were doing when they went to Asakusa. The point is surely, that the Senjō-ji was about magic and about being surrounded my mystery. Mysteries are not understood. Saying people were never bothering hardly gets to grips with the issue.

And this brings me to the most peculiar thing about Hur's book. He shuns concern with the study of *religiosity*. Rituals are barely taken seriously. As the reader is presented again and again (and again) with the postulate that the Sensō-ji is about a prayer/play bond which obviates the need to say any more. The book's title has it there clearly, which is fair enough, but the chapter titles are then: "The Buddhist Culture of Prayer and Play", "The Built-in Unity of Prayer and Play", "The Cultural Politics and Prayer and Play" and then the conclusion is entitled "The Cradle of Prayer and Play". We fast weary of this simplistic analysis. A more comparative approach that showed just how this kind of Buddhism might have sat together with other kinds, or how the Sensō-ji operated with other temples, or indeed household *butsudan* etc., is not investigated.

I read this book when it was a PhD dissertation, and found it informative. I got the feeling this time around that an editor had asked for more context, and there is a clear attempt here to set the Sensō-ji in a larger world. But that isn't a larger world of Buddhism. There are interesting sections on the decline of home-ownership, the breakdown of the *machi*, the decline of communal spirit, and much more. But these discursive essays within the book are not fully woven in, and investigation of the footnotes reveals they have not really been Hur's research interests, but are add-ons.

Finally, as an art historian, I must object to the use of visual evidence. The Sensō-ji has a wealth of pictures associated with it, from hand scrolls to prints, not to mention its *ema* and architectural and sculptural treasures. Hur was not under any obligation to address these things (Helen Baroni's recent book *Obaku*, manages to miss all visual matters but still be complete on its own terms), but he has chosen to put them in. It is alarming, therefore, that all the prints are referred

Nam-lin Hur's reappraisal of prayer and play and their inherent connectedness provides a cultural critique of conventional scholarship on Tokugawa religion and shows how Edo commoners incorporated cultural politics into their daily lives through the pursuit of prayer and play. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon. Online Stores ¾. Audible Barnes & Noble Walmart eBooks Apple Books Google Play Abebooks Book Depository Alibris Indigo Better World Books IndieBound. Libraries. Hardcover, 320 pages. Early Modern Japan: An Interdisciplinary Journal, v10 n1 (Spring 2002), pp. 64-66. Description: Author Institution: University of London and Sainsbury Institute. URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/606>. Collections. Early Modern Japan: Volume 10, Issue 1 (Spring 2002). Items in Knowledge Bank are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. on Facebook. ResearchGate has not been able to resolve any references for this publication. Recommended publications. Discover more about: Japan. Article. Book Review: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays. Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensoji and Edo Society. Nam-lin Hur. The unique amalgam of prayer and play at the Sensoji temple in Edo is often cited as proof of the "degenerate Buddhism" of the Tokugawa period. This investigation of the economy and cultural politics of Sensoji, however, shows that its culture of prayer and play reflected changes taking place in Tokugawa Japan, particularly in the city of Edo. Play was an integral part of the business of religion at Sensoji, and the temple supplied both in equal measure to often rootless Edoites.