



**Williams, Duncan Ryūken, *The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan***

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, xiv + 241 pp.  
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LIFTING THE VEIL covering *The Other Side of Zen* and discussing its contents constitutes a real pleasure. Not only has this publication been much awaited, but its fresh perspective—seeking to highlight the “other dimension” of Sōtō Zen as a “lived religion” in contrast to the idealized image presented in traditional studies—ushers in a welcome breeze to this field, where still too few contributions deserve attention. Williams’s book does not only disclose a whole range of new facts concerning the Sōtō school during the Tokugawa and early Meiji periods, it also proposes an original approach to put them into perspective. Occasionally reviewers tend not to mention when a book is the product of a dissertation, perhaps because it might discourage non-academic readers. This book provides an excellent example that this is a groundless concern. Its first incarnation as a dissertation, “Representations of Zen: An Institutional and Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Edo Japan,” already was readable and showed promise. When submitted at Harvard several years ago, it benefited from the expert direction of Helen Hardacre. When I first obtained a copy, reading the manuscript was almost as pleasant as reading a novel. The facts revealed were so thrilling that I could not help but peruse the text from beginning to end. Fortunately, the final book has become even better. Having a closer look at its contents is probably the best way to clarify the impact this publication may have. Let us note that it proceeds in impressionist-like touches, whose overlapping suggests the general image. This technique is required to stress the “messy picture of the ‘other side of Zen’” (117), which is multifarious, ever changing, and less clearly delimited than sketchy accounts based on a single set of sources.

In the first chapter, “Toward a Social History of Sōtō Zen,” the author reveals his ambitious project of counterbalancing “the customary approach to the study of Japanese Zen Buddhism.” He chooses to avoid focusing on well-known teachers, and to examine instead how “the vast majority of ordinary Sōtō Zen monks and laypeople never practiced Zen meditation, never engaged in iconoclastic acts of the Ch’an/Zen masters (as described in hagiographical literature), never solved kōans, never raked Zen gardens, never sought mystical states, and never read Dōgen’s writings” (3). Writing a social history of this kind has become possible thanks to the publication of a wealth of new sources, and this publication can be seen as a first important step toward exploiting these materials. As the author acknowledges, the timeframe of this study provides a sequel to Bodiford’s work on the medieval period, focusing on the Tokugawa period, and sometimes also dealing with the early Meiji era. The

overlap over the Meiji era incidentally demonstrates that the radical political change brought by the Restoration didn't necessarily affect so much local cults and beliefs.

The second chapter, "Registering the Family, Memorializing the Ancestors: The Zen Temple and the Parishioner Household," looks at the development of parish temples, a topic that deserves attention because it is one of the keys to the organization of Tokugawa Buddhism. Yet, statistical data or general statements on the religious policy of the bakufu can easily fall into dry scholarship. Here, Williams succeeds in making this interesting by focusing on concrete examples and providing anecdotes that keep the reader's interest alive without distracting from the essential elements. The relentless exploitation of a woman parishioner by a priest, social discrimination applied to posthumous names, or challenges to temple authority in rural areas, all epitomize the climate that dominated relationships between the clergy and society at large.

The third chapter, "Funerary Zen: Managing the Dead in the World Beyond," deals with the topic of death management, an area that has already been dealt with by a generation of scholars. However, this theme is still far from having been exhausted and, here again, Williams provides a good synthesis while bringing less-known elements of information to feed our thirst for new data and analysis. The fascinating context of the *Blood Pool Hell Sūtra* (*Ketsubonkyō* 血盆經) and its exploitation at Shōsenji 正泉寺 provides us with a clear case-study, showing how female parishioners and nuns were told that outside the recitation of this scripture there was no way to avoid damnation.

The fourth chapter, "The Cult of Dōryō Daigongen: Daiyūzan and Sōtō Prayer Temples," forces us to overcome the traditional boundaries of Buddhist scholarship to examine the emergence of a popular cult and its links with mountain ascetics and Shinto. "The great avatar Dōryō" 道了大權現 had been a mountain ascetic before becoming a Sōtō monk, and was eventually appointed as head cook and administrator. However, upon his death in 1411, he vowed to become the guardian of the monastery and he is believed to have metamorphosed into a *tengu* 天狗 (a goblin). According to legend, "his body was then engulfed in flames as he appeared transformed and stood on a white fox to promise a life free from illness and full of riches for those who sincerely worshipped him" (62). Here, the legendary anecdote leads to a detailed analysis of how since the seventeenth century this became linked to the mass production and sale of the Dōryō talisman. Another related phenomenon is that of pilgrimage to this sacred site, highlighted through the concrete evidence provided by stone markers. It allows the author to determine that these pilgrimages "took off from the mid-1860s" (69).

The fifth chapter, "Medicine and Faith Healing in the Sōtō Zen Tradition," further investigates the close links between miraculous medicine or healing practices and Sōtō temples. The two main examples given are first the medicine called Gedokuen 解毒圓 (the "poison-dispelling pill") that was produced at Dōshōan 道正庵, a pharmacy in Kyoto, and second the cult of Togenuki Jizō とげぬき地藏 (the "splinter-removing Jizō" bodhisattva). Williams lists a wide range of illnesses that

were cured through faith in this bodhisattva, and translates various miracle stories of healing that center on the time span between 1713 and 1812. Sources such as the *Enmei Jizōson inkō riyakuki* 延命地藏尊印行利益記 [Record of benefits gained from printing talismans of the prolonging-life Jizō], written in 1822, allow us to get a precise idea of how their authors understood the efficiency of specific rituals to cure specific problems. It is fascinating to note that these problems were far from being limited to physical ailments, and also included issues such as “loss of money” or being “about to commit suicide.”

The conclusion introduces another anecdote, the story of a maid who purportedly became a ghost after having been pushed to death because she had broken a valuable plate. She was eventually saved from her miserable ghostly state by a Sôtō teacher who bestowed a Zen lineage chart upon her. This story highlights the fate of a servant within the established social hierarchy and serves to illustrate further the fact that “Buddhism has never existed in a sociopolitical vacuum, and its articulation within social and historical context brings great depth to our understanding of the tradition” (124). Thus, this whole book is an attempt to add “the voices of ordinary monks, village officials, lay parishioners, traveling pilgrims, and women’s associations to the words of the eminent monks,” an addition that should “help us to represent Buddhism more accurately and fully” (124). It also implies that scholars will have to address the challenge of how to integrate these various levels of understanding.

The last section includes two translations, followed by useful notes, a glossary, and an excellent bibliography. The index is far from exhaustive, but fulfills some basic needs. Here, I must mention my only serious reservation about the whole book: the glossary. The author cannot be the only one to blame for the poor quality of the glossary, and the publisher should have hired a native Japanese speaker to copyedit this section. Unfortunately, the glossary is filled with dozens of typos, especially mistakes in macrons representing long vowels. More attention could also have been devoted to include some missing technical terms or proper names. Since other publications on Buddhism released by Princeton University Press show the same defect, something must be done about this flaw, which tends to undermine the credibility of otherwise excellent books.

The present review can only scratch the surface, but this book definitely constitutes one of the first significant contributions in a Western language that specifically focuses on the religious practices of Sôtō believers during the Tokugawa period. Obviously, this also means that a new field is emerging, and that the present book does not give the last word on popular Zen during Tokugawa. Its major contribution is to widen our perspective, and to convincingly show to what extent a majority of the accounts of this period are biased because they overemphasize the religion of the elite. In this respect, it responds to a pressing need, and does so with elegance. A major challenge for researchers concerning the necessity to balance sources remains: average people seldom leave written accounts of their beliefs and practices. However, we now begin to see a possibility to circumvent this obstacle, by

focusing onto the indirect evidence people unknowingly left in temple logbooks, in the form of amulets or other artifacts. This methodological dimension will no doubt bear some impact on the way religious scholars conceive their own work on the Tokugawa period or beyond.

I further believe that Williams's book has the potential to reach a wide audience, since each topic is illustrated by anecdotes or stories that enhance its interest and make it accessible. This publication may therefore be suggested even for undergraduate students, and my hope is that it will inspire other young scholars. Since this area and this approach are so new, there is obviously room for further digging into the same subject and expanding its scope. Here, I think in particular of going beyond the boundaries of one particular denomination. Examining beliefs and practices at the popular level could precisely provide a common ground taking precedence over belonging to a specific school or tradition.

We are dealing here with types of practices whose nature suggests sociological approaches in addition to their religious dimension. Thus, the fact that *The Other Side of Zen* lies at the intersection between history, social studies, history of religions, anthropology, and intellectual history may attract readers with a range of backgrounds, even outside the academia. I personally recommend it to all people interested in pre-modern Japan.

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