

## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism 10 (2009): 85 - 92*



**Pure Land Buddhism in Modern Japanese Culture.**

By Elisabetta Porcu. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008,

xii + 263 pages. ISSN 0169-8834. ISBN:

978-90-04-16471-0 (hardcover), € 119.00, US

\$177.00.

Reviewed by

Jeff Wilson

Assistant Professor

University of Waterloo

[jewilson@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca](mailto:jewilson@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca)

*Copyright Notes:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:

<http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

Book Review

*Pure Land Buddhism in Modern Japanese Culture*. By Elisabetta Porcu. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, xii + 263 pages. ISSN 0169-8834. ISBN: 978-90-04-16471-0 (hardcover), €119.00, US \$177.00.

Reviewed by

Jeff Wilson

Assistant Professor

University of Waterloo

[jewilson@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca](mailto:jewilson@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca)

Elisabetta Porcu's book *Pure Land Buddhism in Modern Japanese Culture* is a welcome corrective for the common view in the West (and not so uncommon in Japan, either) that Japanese culture is based on so-called Zen values or concepts and, further, that this has produced a unique civilization. As Porcu shows, much of this is empty rhetoric used by sectarians to promote Zen to a Western public unaware of the true complexity of Japanese Buddhism and culture, and used within Japan itself to support nationalism and Japanese cultural chauvinism. Her main method of puncturing this myth is by looking at some of the many contributions that Pure Land Buddhism, primarily Jodo Shinshuu, has provided Japanese culture.

In some ways, it is surprising that we had to wait until 2008 for a book to come along in English that documents such an obvious fact. Jodo Shinshuu is the largest form of Buddhism in Japan, much larger than Zen, and, combined with other Pure Land traditions such as Jodo Shuu, represents an enormous number of Japanese

Buddhists and their religious institutions. How could such a numerically dominant type of Buddhism *not* have wide-ranging influences on Japanese culture? That such influences have generally been invisible to people in the West, and even some scholars of Japan, suggests a serious failure of comprehension.

As Porcu tells it, this lack of comprehension is largely caused by the eclipse of Pure Land in twentieth century discussion of Japanese Buddhism, by a Zen which was decontextualized and marketed to a Western audience by savvy innovators such as Suzuki Daisetsu (better known as D.T. Suzuki outside Japan). Zen was alleged to be the root of any and all aspects of Japanese "high culture," including calligraphy, tea ceremony, martial arts, and so on. This promotion of Zen and high culture was originally intended to assert Japan's equality with Western nations. Soon a strategic "Occidentalism" evolved whereby Japan's advancement in such arts, and in the mystical orientation that supposedly underlay them, demonstrated the nation's superiority to the supposedly materialistic, shallow, individualistic culture of the West. This Occidentalism was used to justify, among other things, the Japanese imperial agenda and acts of war throughout East Asia and the Pacific.

While true and important, this story is one that is already familiar to experts in the field, advanced through the works of Robert Sharf, Brian Victoria, Bernard Faure, James Ketelaar, Judith Snodgrass, and others. Thus, while Porcu does an admirable job of literature review, and adds a few new tidbits to the narrative, this long first section of the book treads ground that is already established. Where her volume offers truly useful new material is in her discussions throughout the book of how Jodo Shinshuu apologists, too, displayed such chauvinistic Occidentalism, and, especially, in her analyses of Pure

Land influence on specific arts and artists. Therefore I will focus on this aspect of the book for the remainder of this review.

Porcu analyzes three main areas of Pure Land influence: literature, creative arts, and tea ceremony. In her discussion of Jodo Shinshuu influence on modern Japanese literature, she notes that the founder Shinran is the most popular Buddhist figure in the publishing world of Japan, with over 700 books about him produced in recent decades. Indeed, a visit to any Japanese bookstore will readily attest to the plethora of books of this nature – Shinran well outstrips other popular figures such as Doogen and Kuukai, and this is without even considering the many volumes devoted to the *Tannisho*, a collection of his sayings, and to Rennyō, his descendant and a major publishing subject in his own right. Works on Jodo Shinshuu more generally are approximately equal in number to those on Zen.

Porcu discusses several major modern writers, starting with Niwa Fumio. Raised in a Jodo Shinshuu family of the Takada-ha denomination, Niwa left the religious life to pursue a literary career. Subsequently, his Buddhist upbringing became a major source for literary material, as in his famous novel *Bodaiju* (translated as *The Buddha Tree*, though "The Bodhi Tree" is closer in meaning). Niwa sets the novel at a Jōdo Shinshū temple much like his own, with characters that reflect his family members and parishioners whom he knew growing up. Through his storytelling, Niwa presents a detailed portrait of life at a temple, the plot of the novel hinging on the presence of *bonno*, the blind passions discussed by Shinran, in the various characters. Porcu also discusses Natsume Sooseki, a major novelist who draws on elements of Pure Land Buddhism in various books. An important dimension of this is his use of the Ootani-ha reformer

Kiyozawa Manshi's life as inspiration for the biography and actions of his characters. Aspects of the Pure Land tradition, such as the use of *nembutsu*, also appear overtly in several of Natsume's novels.

One particularly interesting writer that Porcu analyzes is Kaneko Misuzu, a poet whose works came to enjoy tremendous posthumous success after her youthful suicide, easily placing her among the most widely-known modern female poets of Japan. Pure Land influence and images are clear throughout her poetry, and Porcu points out in particular how Kaneko's display of tender compassion for all manner of living things, especially lower animals preyed upon by humans, derives from the Jodo Shinshuu idea of Amida Buddha's universally embracing compassion.

Porcu devotes the book's third chapter to analysis of Pure Land influences on Japanese creative arts, and this section is probably the strongest part of the book. The many writers that Porcu mentions in chapter two certainly draw on the Pure Land tradition for images, characters, plots, and tone, but there is little evidence provided that Pure Land Buddhism has actually stimulated the development of wholly new forms of writing or literary theories. Such criticism is not applicable to her discussion of the creative arts, however. Indeed, one of the most fascinating elements of the entire book is Porcu's extended discussion of Yanagi Soetsu, the founder of the *mingei* folkcrafts movement. Yanagi was a writer and art critic whose theories drew directly on Jodo Shinshuu philosophy. For Yanagi, other power, not the individual genius of the artist, was the source of beauty in folkcrafts. As a pamphlet from the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo (established by Yanagi) explains:

Yanagi theorized that the arduous repetition of work

brought total disengagement of self; no hesitation, anxiety, or ambition in creation. Submissive reliance on *tarikī* (other power) or the "Greater Power" resulted in the production of warm [i.e. not based on cold, rational calculation] items through the medium of man. Yanagi accounted tradition – the accumulation of wisdom and experience – as the "Given Power" [another synonym for *tarikī*] that enabled the individual "to produce work of astonishing merit with the utmost ease." (p. 156)

Further, Yanagi's aesthetic theory of the Pure Land of Beauty derives from his reading of the fourth *bodhisattva* vow in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra (Daimuryōjūkyō)*, which states that there is no distinction between beauty and ugliness in Amida Buddha's realm. This was the key that allowed him to promote folkcrafts as equal in importance and inherent quality with fine art pieces produced by aristocratic monks or talented artists. He asserted that manufactured objects have a "beauty-nature" corresponding to the notion of inherent Buddha-nature, and that all are therefore worthy of attention, no matter how humble their origin. Paraphrasing Shinran's famous formula from the *Tannishō*, Yanagi asserted that "The genius can produce exceptional work, all the more so can the common man – with the help of the Buddha" (p. 153).

Among the figures influenced by Yanagi, Porcu analyzes the woodblock artist Munakata Shikō. Munakata developed a *tarikī* approach to his work, asserting that it was not he who actually created, but rather that the print was bestowed upon him by the power of the woodblock and the colors themselves. This is reflected in his use of the *urazaishiki* back-coloring technique, which allows the colors to soak through indirectly, manifesting through their own channels rather than through the direct calculation of the artist. Porcu also discusses a contemporary multi-media artist, Mori Mariko, who

draws on Pure Land imagery in her installations.

Porcu's final chapter discusses *chanoyu*, the famous tea ceremony of Japan. Long associated in the West with the Zen tradition, Porcu shows how in fact this cultural rite has had multiple influences, focusing especially on the relationship between Pure Land and tea. Even the founding grandmaster of tea, Sen no Rikyuu – or at least whoever wrote in his name *The One-Page Testament of Rikyuu*, which is clearly derived from Hoonen's even more famous *One-Page Testament* – displays clear Pure Land influences. As Porcu discusses, there are tea schools that, while formally affiliated with Rinzai Zen, have close and long-standing relationships with both Honganji traditions of Jodo Shinshuu. Here she draws on fieldwork conducted at a Jodo Shinshuu temple in Kyoto and elsewhere. The view of tea that she provides is contradictory to the most popular one, and the differences she highlights help correct common misconceptions. Porcu describes the way of tea as an art primarily taught by women, to women, held in Buddhist temples from a wide variety of denominations and also in secular spaces, and pursued for its own sake and not designed to produce some form of enduring Buddhist realization. This is quite different from the romanticized view of Zen and tea so often given in English sources. In passing, she also mentions the significant involvement of Jodo Shinshuu in influencing and promoting other cultural phenomena such as *noo* drama and *ikebana* (flower arrangement).

At times, this volume reads like the dissertation that it originated as, rather than as a more accessible book. There is more literature review than necessary, and phrases in foreign languages (Japanese, German, Italian, and more) sometimes appear with no translation. The book could have been improved with more attention to Pure Land influences in pop culture, not just the fine arts

or crafts. For example, it would have been very interesting to analyze Jodo Shinshuu influences in movies, television, music, or manga (examples of each spring readily to mind). And the restriction of "culture" to arts itself means that possible Pure Land influences on politics, economics, manufacturing, social relationships, and other aspects of culture are never given due consideration. As such, this is more of a book about Pure Land Buddhism in modern Japanese art, rather than in "culture" per se.

But these are mostly quibbles that could profitably lead to a sequel volume of sorts. The actual work undertaken here is still important and overdue. By revealing both the inaccuracy of Zen-oriented myths about Japanese culture and the considerable presence of Pure Land influence in selected aspects of Japanese culture, Porcu helps us to reevaluate the unbalanced relationship between these two traditions in the Western conception of Japanese Buddhism. The reader is forced to conclude that the Zen contribution, while significant, has been grossly overstated, in part for political reasons, and the Pure Land contribution, also large, has been falsely minimized. With the arrival of Porcu's book, such erroneous views will be far harder to maintain in the future.