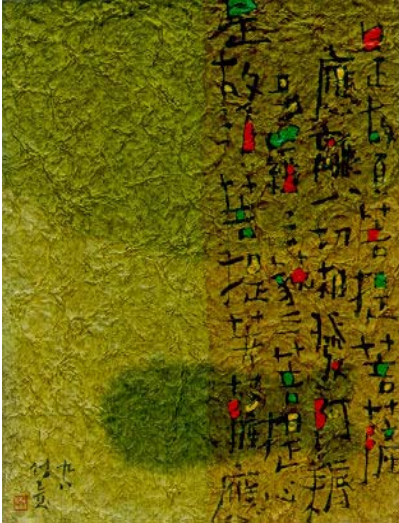


## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism 8 (2008): 174 - 180*



*Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan*

*Modernity.* By Cristina Rocha. Honolulu:

University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, 256 pages.

ISBN 8-8248-2976-X (cloth) \$37.00.

Reviewed by

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*F*or more than a decade now, Cristina Rocha has been one of the most engaged and qualified researchers of Buddhism in Brazil and her book on Zen in her home country, based on her Ph.D. dissertation finished in 2003 at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, is a summary of the results of her untiring field studies on the issue.

According to the introduction, the publication, whose main body is composed of five chapters, represents "fundamentally a study of how the discourse of modernity has historically influenced a sector of Brazilian society... to adopt Zen as a sign of the 'modern'." (p. 3) The first two chapters deal with the historical aspects constitutive for the emergence and diffusion of Japanese Buddhism in Brazil. Chapters three and four discuss the manifestations, the national socio-historical and religious circumstances, as well as the global context of Buddhism in general and Zen in particular in Brazil. Claiming that "the adoption of Buddhism in Catholic countries... should be differentiated from its adoption in Protestant nations," (p. 7) the last chapter takes up the main question of the book, that is, how Buddhism in Brazil was "creolized" and in which sense the outcome reflects the specific conditions of the so-called "biggest Catholic country" in the world.

The first chapter gives an overview of the formal and political prerequisites for and the process of Japanese immigration to Brazil. It includes attention to the socio-historical circumstances of the establishment of Japanese religious institutions, especially after World War II in reaction to the decision of most Japanese families not to return to their homelands but to stay forever in Brazil. Though this chapter focuses on the "sender" as a key-element for the transplantation and adoption of Zen in Brazil, Rocha also reminds her readers of the importance of the Kyoto School for the contemporary predominant understanding of Zen as a culturally "independent" and universally applicable religious practice. She notes this concept is not immediately compatible with the "historical choices" made by the Soto Zen School and therefore has been a potentially polemic issue in the debates between the "conservative" hierarchy of the Busshinji Temple of São Paulo and the "modernist" overseas ministers sent by the Soto School to Brazil since the 1950s.

As its title "Non-Japanese Brazilians and the Orientalist Shapings of Zen" indicates, the book's second chapter focuses on the side of the "receiver," analyzing the dynamics and sources that contributed to a positive image of Japan in Brazil and that led members of the privileged social strata to develop a sympathetic openness towards the country's culture. While this erudite appreciation of Japanese culture stood in opposition to the initially quite negative "popular" image of the Japanese immigrants, it was in accordance not only with a romantic Orientalism echoing the works of some Brazilian nineteenth century poets and literary figures, but also with the Japan-friendly tone in the works of European writers and the *japonaiserie* that in the first half of the twentieth century rubbed off on Brazil from France, whose trends and attitudes Brazilians took as an exemplary model in that period. Among other articulations, the latter influence expressed itself in a growing popularity of *haiku* poetry which first was adopted in French and then English traditions, but from the 1930s inspired Brazilian authors to write their own *haikus* in Portuguese. Interest in Asian religions including Buddhism in general and Zen in particular was also aroused through the

books of European and North American authors such as Hermann Hesse, Eugen Herrigel, and Alan Watts. In a few (but for the adoption of Buddhism in Brazil, significant) cases, Western Esotericism, particularly Theosophy, played a role as a mediator. Rocha indicates that the number of non-Japanese Brazilians who became regular practitioners or engaged themselves in transmitting Buddhism to a "second generation" was humble. But -- according to the author -- this small number was partly compensated by the reputation of these protagonists as intellectuals, a reputation that "would guarantee a constant, if small, flow of interest in Zen by non-Japanese Brazilians." (p. 90)

Chapter three reflects upon the conditions for the acceptance of Zen in a country often stereotyped as the world's largest Catholic nation yet at the same time well known for the multi-ethnic origins and the predisposition towards religious syncretism of its population. Referring to the results of the last national census of 2000, the author concludes that taking "this complex, plural, and porous religious universe" into consideration, "it is not surprising that Zen Buddhism found a place in the country." (p. 95) For Rocha, one important factor in this process has been the constant decline of official Catholicism during the last decades. Further, she reminds us not to forget the foregoing propagation of *karma* and reincarnation in Kardecism and Umbanda, and even the presence of Eastern entities including a figure known as "The Buddha" in the symbolic universe of Umbanda. These have contributed considerably to Buddhism's acceptance in Brazil, as it "encountered a base in which it could germinate and develop." (p. 96) As well as these constituents on the "supply-side," there has also been a change on the "consumer side." A growing individualization and autonomy has made these consumers more responsible for "his/her own combination of picking, choosing, mixing, hybridizing, and creolizing from different religious traditions according to her/his needs in her/his 'spiritual journey.'" (p. 120)

Based on arguments borrowed from theorists like Le Goff, Bourdieu and Featherstone, the fourth chapter focuses on the

public image of Buddhism created by movies, cover stories of magazines, and newspaper articles and their ambiguous effect on the Brazilian audience. Beyond any doubt, the frequency with which Buddhism has been mentioned in the press has considerably broadened common knowledge about it. It is now generally associated "with values such as nonviolence, inner peace, compassion, equality, justice, love, happiness and harmony" and considered an "antidote to the stress and violence of Brazil's urban centers." (p. 152) At the same time, however, "the diffusion of Zen Buddhism in Brazil can be seen as a part of a 'faculty club culture'" (p. 150) whose "members" do not necessarily welcome the growing accessibility of Buddhism. For them, Zen is primarily an expression of a lifestyle or fashion linked to the upper class serving as a symbolic marker of a distinguished position and privileged status within Brazilian society.

Nuancing earlier reflections on the tensions between the ethnic Japanese hierarchy of the Busshinji Temple and Soto Zen overseas ministers sent to São Paulo, the fifth chapter starts by questioning the universality of the "widespread assumption that Buddhism in the West is typically fractured between 'ethnic' and 'convert' practices," since in Brazil "there is a host of interactions, hybridizations, and creolizations that make the boundaries between the two congregations very porous." (p. 153) Therefore Rocha considers neither the above quoted dichotomization; nor the threefold distinction between "elite," "missionary," and "immigrant" types of Buddhism; nor the binary distinction between "traditionalist" and "modernist" Buddhists fully compatible with the real situation of Brazilian Buddhism. Instead, she calls attention to the religious spectrum generated by different generations of Japanese Brazilians and by non-Japanese Brazilian sympathizers or practitioners of Zen. Supplying appropriate examples from already "Brazilianized" children and grandchildren of Japanese immigrants to Brazil, Rocha notices a routine characterized by "parallel" references both to Catholicism and traditional Japanese Religions, including Buddhism. This "duality," which is rooted in the traditional Japanese multi-religious attitude and further stimulated by the tolerance and

flexibility typical of Brazilian culture, is shaped according to the particular biographical events and actual problems of the practitioner. As far as Buddhist institutions are concerned, the "creolization" of Buddhism and Christianity manifests on the occasion of funerals, wedding-ceremonies, and baptism-rituals capable of satisfying the expectations of a Catholic, socialized, non-Japanese audience.

Before making a few critical remarks on this publication, I want to emphasize that Rocha offers profound insight into a phenomenon that in the past has been considerably neglected by the great majority of the Brazilian researchers on religion. Additionally, *Zen in Brazil* is very well organized and written in a reader-friendly style.

First, a critique that is also a compliment. The book's scope is larger than its title would indicate. A great deal of the information presented, including many examples quoted by the author, transcends a focus on Zen, since it refers to Brazilian Buddhism in general or to other segments of Japanese Buddhism, especially to Shin Buddhism (see, for example, p. 164 and p. 176). This inconsistency might mislead an audience particularly interested in Zen Buddhism, but turns out to be an advantage for readers involved in the study of Western Buddhism in all of its facets. More essential for an evaluation of the book are the following three issues.

The author repeatedly confirms that there has been a "Zen-boom" in Brazil. While it is obvious that Buddhism including Zen has gained a high degree of visibility within Brazilian society and enjoys a considerably positive public image, there is a dramatic gap between this, one might say, "superficial" popularity and a statistically relevant number of Brazilians who declare themselves Buddhist or even practice it. As a (legitimate) consequence of both her methodological preference (sixty in-depth interviews with "explicit" Buddhists, enriched by a series of "paradigmatic" statements of Buddhist protagonists) and her attention to written material stemming from multiple sources, Rocha is not very concerned with the results of quantitative studies. The table (p. 95) that

gives some of the main results of the 2000 National Census (and whose more profound readings might, in my view, prove the hypothesis of a Zen-Boom wrong), is very much an exception to the general focus of the book. More than that, the number of 245,871 Buddhists (a mere 0.15% of the Brazilian population!) quoted by Rocha originally appeared in the context of the *preliminary* data published soon after the last census. The *final* figure is not only lower (214,873) but, in comparison to the number of Buddhists (236,408) in the penultimate census in 1991, indicates a considerable statistical decline of the Buddhist sector in only nine years (and despite a growth of about 15% in the country's population). Unfortunately, the National Censuses do not tell us how many of these Buddhists are associated with Zen. But as far as the participation in the meetings in local Zen institutions is concerned, one might assume that the statement of Francisco Handa, minister of the Busshinji Temple in São Paulo, is representative. According to Handa, there are many Brazilians interested in Zen, but the great majority are not committed to Buddhist practice. In the case of Soto Zen, not more than about thirty people, most of them non-Japanese Brazilians, regularly attend meetings. (1) Taking this kind of finding into account, the assertion that Brazil has witnessed a "Zen-Boom" seems not very convincing.

A second critique questions the book's *leitmotif* that the adoption of Zen in Brazil is a function of the "quest for cosmopolitan modernity." That makes sense, but what is missing is an operationalization of the concept of "modernity" in the Brazilian context and an explication of how Zen in particular (or, better, Zen "creolized" according to the conditions of Brazilian culture) fulfills this alleged quest. The reader is left with important questions. Is the author's hypothesis completely compatible with a religion frequently characterized as "anti-intellectual" and as such once privileged by members of the *counter-culture* in *opposition* to the standards a mainstream "modern" society? To what degree has counter-culture rhetoric been maintained by Brazilian Zen Buddhists not affiliated with the small circle of intellectuals who attended the Busshinji Temple in the late 1950s and

1960s and "saw their knowledge of Zen not as a form of cultural resistance, but rather as a tool enabling them to demonstrate both their role in Brazilian society as translators and interpreters of overseas avant-garde movements *and* their prestigious position as cosmopolitans" (p. 73)?

Last but not least, the programmatic claim to analyze the adoption of Zen according to the heuristic potential of the category of "creolization" is not satisfactorily fulfilled. The—at best—five pages of the conclusion (pp. 193-198) where one could expect the result of the relevant discussion do not dispel this concern. Throughout the book the process of "creolization" is almost taken for granted. As the fifth chapter, as well as other parts of the book, show, there is of course a considerable amount of "creativity, agency, and innovation" (p. 19) within Zen Buddhism in Brazil, but to what extent do its dynamics reveal something uniquely Brazilian? Rather being exclusively true for Brazil as a predominantly Catholic country, most of the aspects discussed by the author can be observed in any Western country to which Zen was "exported." (see, for example, p. 172) Indeed, as Rocha herself confirms, we can observe the same dynamics in contemporary Japan (p. 177). Given this, I suggest Brazilian Zen would be better described as a local expression of "internationalized Zen" than as an "indigenized" Zen (p. 19).

Independent of my critical remarks, *Zen in Brazil* is an important, illuminating, and stimulating monograph on a widely unknown subject. Reading it is recommended to everyone interested in Western Buddhism and is a must for any Brazilian researcher engaged in the study of the religious dynamics of his/her country.

1. [http://www.ipcdigital.com/print\\_news.asp?descrIdioma=br&codNoticia=7538](http://www.ipcdigital.com/print_news.asp?descrIdioma=br&codNoticia=7538) [Return to Text](#)