

Research Article



Putting a Price on Zen: The Business of Redefining Religion for Global Consumption

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Over the past several decades, Zen has become a mark of global cosmopolitanism. Largely divorced from its religious context, the word “zen” appears in many languages with a remarkable diversity of accepted meanings and usages. In this paper, I outline the historical and cultural factors which have contributed to the dramatic semiotic transformation of Zen in the popular imagination and international media over the past century. I demonstrate that ideas about Zen have evolved through strategic cultural and linguistic associations, and show how the resulting polysemy has led to Zen becoming an ideal marketing byword—one that is freely appropriated and commoditized in a manner that differentiates Zen from almost all other religious traditions. I further suggest that for the Japanese Zen sects, the global popularity and cosmopolitan appeal of Zen has come hand-in-hand with a decentralization of traditional authority and a challenge to the clergy’s role in shaping the future development of Zen.


Keywords: Zen; marketing; commoditization; consumption; semiotics

The widespread use of the word *zen*¹ in marketing and the ease by which it has been co-opted for use in product branding and marketing has always struck me as an odd asterisk in the public conversation concerning religiosity and consumerism in the United States. I became interested in what I have termed “consumer zen” after noticing that Zen is treated very differently from other religious traditions, especially when it comes to the marketing and advertising of consumer products. This is not to say that religion has no place in the “profane” consumer world: to the contrary, religion and religiosity have long been marketing strategies in the American consumer marketplace (R. L. Moore, 1994). For the most part, when religion is deployed in the mass marketing of consumer products, it is used to appeal to targeted audiences (often current or prospective adherents), for whom consumption of these products becomes another means of negotiating identity. Conversely, charismatic religious figures and

¹ In this paper, I distinguish between capital-Z “Zen” to denote Zen as a religion and lower-case z “zen” to connote the word as it is used in general usage. While useful for visually distinguishing between the two concepts for the purposes of this paper, this is a system of my own invention. As such, it does not reflect popular usage which (for reasons that will be explained) makes no such distinction.

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institutions often employ many of the marketing strategies used by major corporations to build brand recognition and a loyal clientele. As Mara Einstein (2008: 4) observes, “the ultimate objective” of using religion in commercial marketing is in nearly every instance “to promote religion itself.”

Consider, in contrast, the proliferation of the use of the word *zen* in advertising copy and in actual product branding. I will discuss this proliferation in detail below, but two examples should suffice here. The first is Creative Labs’ Zen line of music devices,² whose advertisements instruct the consumer to “Find Your Zen.” The second is Nature’s Path Optimum Zen breakfast cereal whose packaging promises the consumer “inner harmony.” While the argument could be made that this branding is targeting a specific audience of consumers, notice how the audience is not “Zen adherents” but rather “those who associate Zen with ‘cool’” and “those who associate Zen with ‘health’,” respectively. What I find remarkable about both of these products is that they are literally co-opting the name of a religion for use as product name and marketing strategy, while having no vested interest in spreading a religious identity or affiliation. With the singular exception of Taoism, I can think of no other religion that has been appropriated in this way, at least in the United States.³

From the above examples, it would seem that as far as popular opinion is concerned, *zen* is not a religious word, and as such is free from the practices that govern the intersection of the so-called “sacred” from the “profane” or “secular” world of marketing and commodification. The picture is of course far more complicated: as I will further suggest, the word *zen* has commercial value not only because it has been stripped of its religious aura, but also because it has consequently been transformed into a semiotic blank canvas upon which qualities desirable to consumers can readily be projected.

Scholars of religion understand that the commodification of religious ideas and practices for profit is neither strange, nor new. Consider the vast sums of money that have been spent to commission religious music and art throughout history; the market for everyday devotional objects and relics; the financial or material sponsorship of rituals, sacrifices, and feasts; and the ever-expanding market for spiritual books, movies, workshops, retreats, seminars, and camps (Carrette and King, 2005; Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013a). Religious traditions throughout the world have perhaps always engaged in a variety of commoditizing strategies that make religion both practicable and profitable (Usunier and Stolz, 2014). In this, Zen is no different, and the historical record shows that Zen survived into the modern period largely on the backs of innovative clergy who discovered new ways to popularize, commoditize, and monetize Zen practice

² Creative’s Zen player is a competitor to Apple’s iOS mobile devices, another ostensibly “Zen-inspired” product (see page 16, below).

³ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005, chapter 3 generally) note that “Tao” and, to a lesser extent, “yoga” have been similarly exoticized and decontextualized from their religious origins. This enables these terms to be used in marketing and branding in many of the same ways as *zen*; i.e. the many how-to books written on “The Tao of...”, or the use of “yoga” to refer generally to exercise regimens with perceived (or promoted) psychological or spiritual benefits. However, I maintain throughout this paper that the semiotic flexibility of *zen* in popular usage goes far beyond that of either of these terms.

throughout the medieval and early modern periods in Japan (see especially Bodiford 1993 and Williams, 2005).

However, I argue that there is something fundamentally different about the way Zen is conceived in the Western—and particularly, American—popular imagination, and that it is this fundamental difference that has allowed *zen* to be used as a commercial buzzword to sell just about anything. To understand how *zen* has become conceptually and linguistically alienated from the religious tradition from which it originated, it is instructive to briefly look at the paths by which Zen entered American cultural consciousness.

Planting the Roots

Buddhism has been part of the American religious landscape since the mid-nineteenth century (Tweed, 2000). From the outset, Victorian-era religious scholars set the terms of the American and European encounter with Buddhism by framing their scholarship in the familiar terminology of Christian theology and the context of Western colonial hegemony. Early scholarship on Buddhism emphasized that religious “authenticity” was found in foundational texts and doctrines, rather than in the vibrant array of everyday cultural and religious praxis that characterized Buddhism *in situ*, which the scholars framed as “degenerate” manifestations of the founder’s teachings (Snodgrass, 2003: 6; Masuzawa, 2005: 126). Further, early scholarship often portrayed Buddhism as antithetical to Christianity, a move which simultaneously highlighted the cultural and moral superiority of the Western imperial effort while providing an interventionist rationale in favor of missionizing to the colonized populations (Snodgrass, 2003; 91; McMahan, 2008: 69). To the extent that Victorian Americans or Europeans were aware of Buddhism as a religion, it was largely this Orientalist caricature of Buddhism that they received.

In this context, Buddhist scholars, clergy, and laypersons from throughout Asia found themselves engaged in a defensive game as they worked to define themselves and their religion on an international stage that was beginning to recognize the possibility of multiple “world religions.” Efforts by Buddhists to assert the dignity and validity of Buddhism were largely bound by the force of political and intellectual hegemony to the terms of Western religious scholarship. Indeed, many of the scholars and clergy who were part of this effort to redefine Buddhism were either themselves educated in Western-style universities, or at the very least were familiar with the philosophical trends of the day through their own scholarship and personal correspondences.

Still, in what Ketelaar has labeled “strategic Occidentalism” (1990: 137), late-Victorian Buddhist scholars and clergy did not passively mimic the hegemonic discourses of the Western imperial powers, but rather used these discourses to their advantage. Of particular strategic value was Romanticism, which provided a seductive alternative to the perceived negative aspects of modernity, such as urbanization, alienation, and industrialization. As McMahan (2008) has shown, Buddhist scholars and clergy found an opportunity in framing their arguments in reference to these Romantic sensibilities—for example, of epiphany, enlightenment, creative spontaneity, unmediated experience, and

unity with nature. So presented, Buddhism gained the attention of influential scholars, intellectual circles, and an interested public for whom Buddhism became more than just an Orientalist curiosity (Pierce, 2010).

Coincident with this strategic renegotiation of Buddhism was the rise of the *Shin Bukkyō* (New Buddhism) movement in Japan. During the Meiji Period, Japanese Buddhism faced criticism at home owing to its long-privileged status under the Tokugawa political regime. In addition, Japanese Buddhism struggled for recognition on the international stage owing to the emphasis that Western scholars placed on the Pali Canon and Theravada Buddhism generally (Snodgrass, 2003: 9). The *Shin Bukkyō* movement aimed to remedy these obstacles by reframing Buddhism as a thoroughly modern religion that could not only be allied with positivistic science and Western philosophy, but could also have universal appeal through the use of plain language and a program of engaged social action (Ketelaar, 1990: 164; Sharf, 1993 4-5; Snodgrass, 2003: 115-136). More significantly, the *Shin Bukkyō* ideologues recognized an opportunity for Japan to take a leadership role in the spread of Buddhism to the world. To accomplish this, Japanese Buddhism needed not only to show the Japanese people as inherently spiritually “gifted” (as opposed to practicing a “degenerate” form of Buddhism), but also to present a unified front to the world, as it was recognized that “doctrinal disputation between sects was not only irrelevant ... but counterproductive” (Snodgrass, 2003: 134). For the moment, at least, sectarian differences were subsumed in the name of a nonsectarian “Eastern Buddhism.”

It is here that we can talk about two “entrances” of Zen into the American religious landscape, though neither would be recognized for their significance at the time. The first entrance is the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where the delegates from Japan—nearly all adherents of the *Shin Bukkyō* ideology—presented their vision of Buddhism as a world religion that could stand toe-to-toe with Christianity, in the latter’s own terms. Within the context of the Parliament, however, the delegates’ speeches lacked much of the ideological punch that they were hoping to deliver; Ketelaar describes the delegates’ speeches to the Parliament as “much more subdued and noticeably less successful in asserting their own sense of religion” than was characteristic of them (1990: 151). In contrast to his fellow delegates, Shaku Sōen, speaking for Japanese Zen, made a “favorable and lasting impression” among the gathered American and European religious scholars (Sharf, 1993: 8). In particular, Sōen’s speech to the Parliament was distinguished from those of his colleagues by his application of current philosophical and phenomenological concepts to Buddhism in a manner that spoke directly to the scholarly interests of his audience. Sōen was very well aware of what he was doing: he was university educated at Keiō University, a Western-style institution, and regularly mingled with Japan’s literary and intellectual elite. Insofar as it was the intention of the Japanese delegates to the Parliament to elevate the status of Buddhism from an Orientalist curiosity to that of a world religion worthy of serious academic study, Sōen and his fellow delegates were largely successful, attracting the attention of many influential scholars in attendance. Shaku Sōen would return to the West Coast of the United States in 1905 to deliver a series of lectures on Buddhism, though he would continue to downplay Zen’s sectarian identity in the interests of the *Shin Bukkyō* endeavor.

A second entrance was the founding of the first North American Zen temples—beginning with Kauai Zenshūji and Waipahu Taiyōji missions to Hawaii in 1903, and later, Zenshūji in Los Angeles in 1922, and Sōkōji in San Francisco in 1934, all belonging to the Sōtō Zen sect—to minister to the religious needs of the growing Japanese immigrant communities in those areas. In addition to these overseas missions were the establishment of various groups and societies dedicated to raising interest in the lay practice of Buddhism, notably the American branch of the Ryōmō Kyōkai established in San Francisco in 1906, and the Buddhist Society of America established in New York in 1931, both founded by students of Shaku Sōen. These temples (and to a lesser degree, the lay practice groups) mainly catered to the needs of the Japanese immigrants they had been established to serve, and were often sites of cultural “creolization” where first- and second-generation immigrants negotiated their cultural and religious identities in a complex, and often unwelcoming, environment (see Williams and Moriya, eds. 2010, especially Rocha 2010). These organizations were also points of contact for non-Japanese Americans who were curious to learn more about Buddhism, even as they were visible targets for vitriolic anti-Japanese sentiment. These temples and groups created a lasting geographical foothold for Zen in the United States, and established California as the de facto “home” of Zen in North America.

In both of these “entrances,” Zen—still incorporated under the umbrella of Eastern Buddhism—was introduced to Americans as a religion, understandable and comparable in the same terms as Christianity. Japan’s military victories against China in 1895 and Russia in 1906 led to public interest on both sides of the Pacific as to the secrets of Japan’s success. Departing from the *Shin Bukkyō* nonsectarian program, but embracing its notion of the Japanese people’s spiritual virtuosity, apologist writers began to credit Zen—dubbed the “religion of the samurai”—for Japan’s military, artistic, and cultural triumphs (Sharf, 1993: 10; Snodgrass 2003: 266-71), much in the same way as Max Weber (2003 [1958]) attributed the rise of capitalist culture in Europe to the Protestant work ethic. From this period through World War II, Zen apologists—among them, Shaku Sōen—extolled Zen for its ability to create a loyal, obedient and disciplined citizenry and military, as Brian Victoria argues (1997: 115).

Zen’s previously unquestioned status as a religion began to change dramatically after World War II. In the wake of the war and the Allied occupation of Japan, American public interest in Japan and Japanese culture increased dramatically. Gone were the wartime propaganda images of the Japanese as hulking monsters in soldiers’ fatigues. In their place, feminized images of Japan as a tranquil landscape of temples, flowing rivers, and graceful geisha in traditional attire (such as was featured on locally-produced cards sold to Allied soldiers to send back to their families for the Christmas of 1945) contributed to the popular fascination with Japan (Dower, 1999: 169; Iwamura, 2011: 26). As the Cold War intensified in the early 1950s with the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, Japan became America’s economic and political ally in the region, and “middlebrow” Americans were increasingly exposed to positive, attractive new images of a pacified Japan. Popular periodicals of the day such as *Reader’s Digest* encouraged feelings of sentiment and commitment in their American readers towards Japan and other Asian countries (Klein,

2003: 81-83) while they simultaneously re-cast Asia in Orientalist tropes of mystery and mysticism (Iwamura, 2011: 40).

In this flurry of American reimagining of Japan, Shaku Sōen's former student and translator D. T. Suzuki was in a unique place to capitalize off of the surge in American interest in Japan. Suzuki's biography is well-trod territory, so I will only mention that his experiences abroad with Sōen and his collaborations with scholars such as Paul Carus left Suzuki with a keen understanding of how to repackage Buddhism for American lay and scholarly audiences (McMahan, 2002: 221). In addition, Suzuki cultivated a network of scholars and public intellectuals in Japan and abroad who were similarly receptive to what he had to say. Suzuki's three-volume *Essays in Zen Buddhism* published during the inter-war period had already established Suzuki as the de facto public face and spokesperson for Zen in the United States (Faure, 1996: 54).

After living in Japan for the duration of the Second World War, Suzuki returned to the United States in 1951, and began lecturing at Columbia University in New York. It was in his 1959 opus, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, that Suzuki gave form to three trends that had been coalescing around Zen since the turn of the twentieth century: first, he established a narrative of Zen being the "pure" and "true" form of Buddhism, the ultimate evolution of the Buddha's teachings; second, he established Zen as granting unmediated access to an ultimate reality, a font of pure experience from which all creativity, harmony, and truth flows; and last, in perhaps the greatest transformation of his career, Suzuki seamlessly fused these ideas to Japaneseness, as both a cultural and racial category, with Zen in the American popular imagination. In so doing, Sharf writes, Suzuki and his cohort "managed to apotheosize the [Japanese] nation as a whole" (Sharf, 1993: 33).

Over the course of the 1950s and '60s, Suzuki himself proved a magnetic and savvy spokesman for all things Zen—and all things Japanese—through lectures, interviews, and his own publications. In addition, the same period saw charismatic Japanese clergy with formal ties to the Zen institution traveling to the United States, often at the behest of superiors within the Japanese Zen institution who were aware of the potential for capitalizing on the blossoming interest in Zen in America (Seager, 2002: 110). These voices introduced Zen to three key demographics in the United States: first, the set of wealthy and stylish conspicuous consumers; second, avant-garde creative types—artists, musicians, and writers, most famously the Beat Poets—who would deeply influence the American counter-culture movement of the 1960s; and third, earnest spiritual seekers looking for alternatives or supplements to institutionalized religion.

To each of these groups, Zen was a mirror which reflected that which was most desired. To the group of fashionable conspicuous consumers, integrating Japanese and "Zen" aesthetic elements into design, fashion and high culture granted an aura of class, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication. For the artists such as the Beat Poets, Zen lent itself to ideals of creativity, spontaneity, altered consciousness, social protest, and irreverence for established authority. To the spiritual seekers, Zen was positioned as a traditional,

but non-religious “philosophy” or “practice” free from doctrine, ritual, and hierarchy.⁴ Binding all three conceptions together was the persistent aura of the Japanese “Other,” embodied most famously in the person of Suzuki (Iwamura, 2011: 31-32).

By Suzuki’s death in 1966, these three perspectives on Zen would be well along in their evolution. For the next several decades, these three *zens* would intermingle and reverberate throughout American popular culture and everyday language, reinforcing one another even as they competed for primacy in the public’s imagination. The identification of Zen with Japan likewise meant that when Japan’s miracle economy reached its full economic potential in the late 1970s and ‘80s, it was a knee-jerk reaction to attribute Japan’s economic successes to Zen, paralleling the narrative that had been created for Japan’s military victories against China and Russia less than a century earlier. Zen, by extension, Japan, and by further extension, Japanese products and services were permeated with a sense of cosmopolitanism, creativity, and tradition—all qualities that, not coincidentally, were reflexively perceived as lacking in American culture and industry.⁵

A “Zen” Explosion

It is as a consequence of these historical trends that *zen* as a concept—distinguishable from Zen, the religion—became both linguistically ubiquitous and semiotically ambiguous in American culture. This legacy survives in its modern usages: English-speakers confidently use the word *zen* in everyday conversations and see it used in print and advertising, but usage patterns reveal a bewildering diversity in accepted meanings.

The most common usages paint *zen* as being synonymous with words such as *calm*, *peaceful*, *harmonious*, *natural*, *simple*, *relaxing*, *focused*, and *traditional*. But there is another side to *zen* which carries connotations of *deep*, *creative*, *energetic*, *inspirational*, *outside-the-box*, *unconventional*, *eclectic*, *contradictory*, *perplexing*, and *non-traditional*. From the many “Zen and the Art of...” books, we have a sense that *zen* means *simplifying* or *not-overthinking*, often used to describe a philosophy of *returning to basics*, being *in the moment* and *in control*. Still other usages of the term bring it further afield by aligning it with *cool*, *sophistication* and *contemporary style*, or even adding an Orientalist flair with connotations of *exotic* or at least *non-Western*. And lastly, while *zen* may be associated with *spirituality*, *New Age*, or *mysticism*, it is virtually never associated with institutionalized religion.

⁴ Much of the groundwork for considering Zen as a “non-religious philosophy” had been laid in the mid-nineteenth century Orientalist scholarship that rendered Buddhism in Christian terms as a type of “atheistic” “philosophical humanism” (Snodgrass, 2003: 97-102). By the 1960s, what originally was a derogatory categorization for Buddhism instead became one of Zen’s most attractive selling points, as it allowed Zen adherents to claim that they were supplementing their religion without replacing it.

⁵ Yamada Shoji’s book *Shots in the Dark* brings this story full circle, describing how Western reimaginings of Zen in the 1960s and 70s led the Japanese to rediscover Zen as a “magic mirror that reflected a beautiful image of themselves,” an image that the Japanese were eager to believe in (2009: 5; 241).

Making things more confusing—especially when trying to convey these points into writing—is the fact that the word *zen* is no longer only used as a proper noun (as in Zen Buddhism or a Zen temple).⁶ In common American English usage, it is also used as a general noun (a moment of ‘zen’) a descriptive noun (in the sense that a person can be ‘zen-like’ or ‘all zen’), an adjective (‘that is so zen!’), and even as a verb (as in, ‘to zen’ or ‘zenning out’).⁷

A piece of amusing anecdotal evidence of this linguistic flexibility in modern American English is the fact that *zen* continues to be a highly problematic word in the board game Scrabble. Of the many Japanese loanwords that are included in the Merriam-Webster Official Scrabble Player’s Dictionary, *zen* is surprisingly not among them. This has nothing to do with *zen*’s “foreignness,” but rather with its official status as a proper noun—the so-called “proper usage”—rendering it an invalid play under the official rules for the game. *Zen* may be the most legitimately disputed word in the game, since most American players of the game likely know *zen* as anything but a proper noun.

Further observations can be made about these usages and glosses. The first is that the Orientalist logic that Suzuki and his cohort used to bind Zen to Japanese culture in the American popular imagination has been dramatically amplified over usage and time. Since both terms are subject to their own semiotic drift, examples of Suzuki’s influence do not actually need to specify Japan or *zen*. In fact, surrogates are often more useful, especially from a commercial standpoint. Japan is often subsumed under a generic “Asian” identity which does not distinguish between ethnic or national boundary. Similarly, *zen*, already a slippery term, can be invoked by one of its many ostensible synonyms—most often “harmony” and “creativity”—especially when paired with a visual image.

Often, one term of the pair is retained, while the other is suggested—for example, *zen* is regularly paired with “Asian,” particularly when food or art is involved. Other instances conflate or confuse *zen* with other so-called spiritual practices that are publicly associated with Asia, such as tai chi and yoga. Even in the absence of explicit reference to either Zen or Japan, we can see the Orientalist influence at play: a recent advertisement for an Asian salad from McDonalds encourages the consumer to “seek flavor, find harmony”—a pithy statement that invokes *zen* through the pursuit of “harmony,” adding that the salad is “pure inspiration.”

The second thing to note about these glosses is that accepted usages tend to be heavily gendered, in the sense that the word *zen* is used differently when it is directed toward men or women. As simple shorthand, and as we will see below, *zen* is used most often in its “creative” or “innovative” senses when it is being used in relation to men or male-oriented products, while it is used in its “harmony” and “peaceful” senses when it is being applied to women or female-oriented products.

⁶ There is evidence that this linguistic shift is taking place in other languages besides English. Cristina Rocha (2005: 21: 131) notes how *zen* has similarly been found in its adjectival form in Brazilian Portuguese since the 1960s.

⁷ Interestingly enough, “zenning out” generally implies the opposite of many of the glosses listed above, and adds connotations of being *unfocused*, *distracted*, or *unaware*, particularly of one’s surroundings.

The Zen of Corporate Marketing

Taken together, *zen* presents a fascinating sociolinguistic object that virtually stands on its own when it comes to its sheer range of usage and meaning. *Zen*'s complex and polysemous nature is perhaps no more pronounced than the way it is used in contemporary corporate culture. Here, I wish to briefly look at how *zen* is deployed in three closely interrelated examples recently drawn from mass-marketed media such as magazines, television, books and advertisements in the United States.

Surveying the genre of “Business Zen” articles, books, and blogs reveals that mastery of the creative, rebellious side of *zen* is commonly held to be a path to becoming a successful entrepreneur and leader. Motivational publications in this vein encourage their largely-male readership to use *zen* to boost their careers by learning to ignore conventional wisdom, trusting their gut feelings, and not being afraid to stand out from the crowd. Here, we find the *zen* of “Zen Master” Phil Jackson, former coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, known for his eclectic incorporation of Buddhist and New Age teachings into his basketball coaching and his players’ training. Likewise, it is also here that we can talk about The Dude, Jeff Bridges’ laid-back, indifferent character from the movie *The Big Lebowski* being a “Zen Master,” a concept that Bridges and Bernie Glassman—himself a recognized Zen master and one of the biggest names in the development of Zen in America—recently parlayed into a co-authored book.⁸ Apple founder Steve Jobs is perhaps the most famous example of this type of modern hero, and Zen’s influence in bringing out his “creative genius” was explored in many of his biographies, including a posthumous graphic novel aptly-titled *The Zen of Steve Jobs*, published by Forbes (Melby 2012).

An article from the advertising industry broadsheet *Advertising Age*, is similarly indicative of this trend, extolling cosmetic giant L’Oreal’s new CMO Marc Ménesguen as a “Zen Master” in the headline (Neff, 2012). This is not for his spiritual prowess, of course, but rather for his mastery of something called the “new Zen of global marketing;” that is, mining the company’s various international offices for the best marketing ideas and putting them into practice on a global level. In this article, we can see clearly how *zen* is implicated in another trend in the business world—the “metaphysical line of managerial literature,” according to Arvidsson (2006: 126, in Manning 2010: 34)—in which executives and designers are described as religious professionals, for example a “guru” or, in this case, a “Zen master,” without retaining any of the religious connotations of the term.

Moving from the executive to the consumer, it is instructive to compare the manner in which Ménesguen’s company L’Oreal sells *zen* to women by emphasizing the opposite of the high stakes, stressful world of corporate marketing. Here, *zen* is sold in the form of HydraZen, a product from L’Oreal’s self-described “high-end” Lancôme skin-care line, which features its trademarked NeuroCalm additive, repeatedly emphasizing the products’ relaxing and stress-relieving qualities. According to advertising copy on Lancôme’s website, each of the HydraZen products aims to “combat the effects of stress

⁸ In a January 9, 2013 appearance on *The Daily Show* to promote this book, Jeff Bridges ordained anchor Jon Stewart as a “Zen Master” through the act of putting a red clown nose on Stewart’s face, claiming “that’s all it takes.”

and soothe all skin types.” Other copy reiterates that “skin looks relaxed,” and each product in the line highlights its ability to “counter the effects of daily stress.” Notice here how the concept of *zen* is differentially applied along a gendered axis that likewise reveals hierarchical distinctions: *zen* is creative and powerful in the form of the masculine “master” who sets the company’s marketing agenda; *zen* is calming and passive in the form of the products that are designed for the “stressed” woman.

In another example, rival Japanese cosmetics company Shiseido also has Zen, a line of skin care products for women, which relies on even more tenuous semiotic associations, consequently underscoring the flexibility behind *zen*. According to Shiseido’s website, the body cream that is part of the Zen line exudes “the radiant fragrance of Zen. The velvety texture melts perfectly into your skin for soft, luxurious moisture. To create the perfect conditions for expressing Zen, your skin is lavished with moisture from the exotic biwa plant.” On a marketing level, this description may be enticing and evocative, implying a plethora of possible associations while simultaneously allowing the consumer to assign their own meaning. Upon closer analysis, however, the copy is vague to the point of being problematic. For one, the consumer has no choice but to fill in the blanks as to what is meant by the “fragrance of Zen.” Reading this copy, I became curious: what *does* Zen smell like? Surely the company is not selling a perfume of cypress wood and heavy incense that permeates Japanese Zen temples. Looking for hints elsewhere in the product line, I discovered that the Zen eau de parfum “convey[s] sweetness and femininity in a new, modern language.” Is Shiseido therefore claiming that the fragrance of Zen is “sweet” and “feminine”? Perhaps not, as the Shiseido Zen for Men eau de toilette is described as having “the power of spicy woods lathered with exotic fruits and masculine musk for an uncompromised sensuality and modern sophistication.” Mirroring the previous discussion, Shiseido’s marketing likewise demonstrates the gendered differentiation of *zen*: feminine, sweet, and modern when sold to women, while being masculine, powerful, and sophisticated when sold to men.

What about non-gender-specific products? Toy company Fisher-Price recently marketed its Zen Collection, a line of baby furniture and accessories which uses the ambiguous nature of *zen* to its fullest effect. The narration of the promotional video introducing the product line describes the collection in a breathy, ethereal voice as:

Inspired by nature, in all its beauty and simplicity. A search for serenity and balance, found in natural textures and elements that awaken baby’s wonder and appreciation of the natural world. A balance between soothing and rejuvenation, tranquility, and well-being. Harmony, in the home, and in the mom-baby relationship.

Echoing the advertising copy we saw earlier with the cosmetics, the copy that accompanies each Fisher-Price item listing goes further to describe “the new, high-end, exclusive Zen Collection for baby” with a “sophisticated, contemporary look” using “upscale materials.” Even the pre-recorded music features are described as “Zen-like”—as if the consumer, having read this far, already knows what that is.

Notice how in these descriptions, nearly every possible positive, albeit *feminine*, gloss for *zen*—natural, beautiful, simple, serene, balanced, wonder, tranquility, well-being, harmony, exclusive, sophisticated, contemporary—is used without fear of contradiction or hyperbole. In fact, the branding can even hint at the meanings which *haven't* been expressly communicated to the consumer. Behind the use of the word *zen* the clear message is by purchasing this furniture for your baby, you will also purchase harmony, creativity, and cosmopolitanism—if not for your child, then at least for yourself as other parents associate you with the product you have purchased. In this regard, it is telling that the product description speaks specifically to the “mom-baby relationship.” The father, ostensibly already a “Business Zen” master, is nowhere to be found.

We are all accustomed to advertising selling us what we think we want (or, what they tell us we want), and as descriptions go, any promise to make our lives better is highly desirable, provided it is believable. The real point, however, is that the lucrative potential of this one word is easily quantifiable: limiting myself to the brands so far discussed in this paper—L’Oreal, Shiseido, and Fisher-Price—we can get a better idea of the true price of *zen*. A comparison of list prices for these products shows that *zen*-labeled items come with a mark-up of between ten to twenty percent from the next tier of products in each company’s catalogue, and upwards of thirty percent from the company’s entry level products. Such a substantial mark-up reveals that these products are intended for those with the means and motives to pay a premium to conspicuously consume *zen*—specifically, those in the upper-middle and upper classes. In addition to adding *luxury* and *exclusivity* to the list of *zen*’s many meanings, we have here quantifiable evidence of how much value can be added to a product, simply by virtue of the name recognition of *zen*.

In each of the examples just described—the visionary and unconventional corporate executive as “Zen master;” the cosmetics lines which allow the stressed-out female consumer to relax and rejuvenate through *zen* skin care; and a baby furniture line which promises serenity and harmony—we can see the clear interweaving of the three threads of *zen* that appeared in the wake of Suzuki and the surge of interest in Zen during the 1950s and 60s and its subsequent commoditization in consumer goods and services. *Zen* continues to have a prominent place in the contemporary American popular imagination as a concept rich with meaning and signification. Despite its internal complexities and contradictions, it is clear that *zen* remains a powerful tool for advertisers and marketers to generate revenue by promising consumers a lot by saying very little.

A Strange Animal, Indeed

It is all well and good to point out the many different usages of *zen*, but it is only fair to point out that Zen has been a linguistic moving target for nearly its entire existence. Without delving into the long history of philosophical and sectarian interpretation that paved the path for the modern Zen religious institution, it helps to remember that whatever we think we understand when we hear the word *zen* in English today is actually a fourth-order gloss. It is a recent rendering of a Japanese transliteration of a Chinese translation of a Sanskrit term for an abstract metaphysical concept that roughly corresponds to modern ideas of “meditation” or “concentration” (Matsumoto, 1997: 242;

Faure 2009: 77). Zen's long history is therefore a history of complex semiotic and linguistic change. On one level, then, to talk about the "proper usage" or "real meaning" of the word *zen* is a distraction. We should really be asking "what does *zen* mean now?" or perhaps more precisely, "What meanings do users attribute to *zen* now?"

While *zen*'s semiotic metamorphosis over the past fifteen centuries is a worthy topic for a book of its own, I am suggesting here that what distinguishes the development of *zen* in the modern era from all other times is both the speed and velocity of the explosion of meanings and usages—a phenomenon known as *hypersignification* (Goldman and Papson, 1996: 82). Even factoring in the regular shifts in organization, doctrine, and practice that have characterized Zen for the entirety of its history, the modern development of *zen*—especially within the past century—is remarkable for the fact that the semiotic transformations have taken place so rapidly and spread so widely. The litany of accepted meanings detailed above reveals that, at least in American English, *zen* really does mean all of these things. Linguistic purists who insist that "Zen" remains a proper noun referring only to a historical Japanese Zen Buddhism are willfully ignoring a rich history of ethnographic data showing semiotic development.

I am suggesting, therefore, that as a consequence of its evolution over the past hundred years, *zen* ought to be classified under what Claude Lévi-Strauss coined a "floating signifier," a term which James Faubion defines as "a meaning-bearing unit that nevertheless has no distinct meaning, and so is capable of bearing any meaning, operating within any given linguistic system as the very possibility of signification" (2010: 93). Put differently, a floating signifier is a sign that lacks a rigid or fixed referent, allowing the sign to be interpreted in fluid and multiple ways. Floating signifiers are akin to mirrors which reflect through signification whatever we want the sign to mean, need the sign to mean, or think the sign means at the moment of usage. In fact, a floating signifier can have multiple meanings operating on several levels of interpretation simultaneously, without any internal contradiction. Furthermore, these interpretations can vary between individuals, each of whom receive and interpret the signifier differently. From this perspective floating signifiers do not *lack* meaning; to the contrary, floating signifiers have the potential to mean virtually anything.

As a semiotic category, we encounter floating signifiers all the time. Signifiers like "love" or "happiness" or "luxury" are used on an everyday basis, despite the words having a wide range of interpretations which vary from situation to situation, and from person to person. The floating nature of these words and others have been put to great use in music, books, and of course, advertising. Similarly, floating signifiers are of particular use to academics who invoke the power of the floating signifier whenever they engage in intellectual "problematization" of a word or concept. Indeed, one of the lasting legacies of postmodern critical scholarship has been that formerly a priori concepts and categories such as "religion," "kinship," or "culture" have been revealed to be floating signifiers. In the wake of the postmodernists, countless pages of scholarship have been written trying to stabilize these categories through redefinition and critical analysis, even as the theoretical terrain continues to shift beneath the scholars themselves.

To a certain extent, the endeavor of modern corporations to transform their brands into floating signifiers reflects the recognized potential power of the concept. Since the 1980s, global corporations such as Apple, Nike and Coca-Cola have shifted away from selling consumers only the material commodities they produce (N. Klein, 2000: 3, cited in Malefyt 2009: 202). Through the power of branding, these corporations endeavor to sell to the consumer a lifestyle of which consumption of the branded commodity is only a visible manifestation of one's personal identification with both the brand and the community of similarly-minded individuals (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Successful branding is more than simply encouraging the consumption of products or the wearing of logos, but rather establishing an affective relationship between the consumer and the brand such that the consumer identifies *with* the brand (i.e. Gatorade's "Be Like Mike" campaign)⁹, and in some cases even *as* the brand (i.e. Apple's "I am a Mac" campaign). In this regard, the brand is *performative* (Nakassis, 2012: 625; 629), and the more a company can shift its brand away from being a rigid designator and towards being a floating signifier, the easier it is for the consumer to embody and internalize positive affective attachments—such as nostalgia, desire, and a sense of community—towards the brand.

To this, I argue that the process of transforming *zen* into a floating signifier has followed a similar trajectory, but the degree to which *zen* has become a floating signifier through hypersignification is exponentially greater than any brand has ever accomplished. It is precisely this complete transformation into a floating signifier that allows the word *zen* to have its lucrative commercial value by allowing the one word to evoke any or all of its attendant meanings simultaneously. At the end of the day, brand names like Apple, Nike, or Coca-Cola must still refer to a specific (that is, rigidly designated) company and its products in order to keep control of its copyright (R. E. Moore, 2003: 334). *Zen*, in contrast, has been set loose from this attachment, and so is free—both in the linguistic and the commercial sense—to be used by anyone and mean anything.

It would seem, therefore, that *zen* would be the ideal brand name. From a purely business perspective, most companies would envy the positive international image that Zen enjoys. Indeed, from this angle, the versatile ways in which the word *zen* is used every day in languages all over the world is very arguably a sign of one of the most successful marketing campaigns in history.

Is Zen a Brand?

All of this leads to a very interesting question: is *zen* a "brand"? The answer is yes and no, depending whether or not one is talking about Zen as a religion or *zen* in its hypersignified popular usage. I would like to turn the discussion to a brief look as to how all of this has played out for the Japanese Zen sects—the putative "brand-holders" of *zen*—and specifically Sōtō Zen, the sect with which I have done the majority of my ethnographic research (see Irizarry, 2011).

⁹ A 1992 advertising campaign which suggested that drinking Gatorade would enable the consumer to "be like" basketball superstar Michael Jordan.

For the Sōtō Zen sect, a legally-constituted religious corporation based in Japan with overseas missions in Europe and the Americas, the conceptual separation of *zen* from Zen has been somewhat of a double-edged sword. While international interest in consumer *zen* has definitely brought attention and tourism to Sōtō Zen temples both in Japan and overseas over the past several decades, the reality is that the Sōtō Zen clergy have had surprisingly limited influence in the semiotic evolution of “consumer *zen*” outside of Japan since the 1960s. As a consequence, the Sōtō Zen clergy have likewise had comparatively little share in the millions of dollars in revenue that *zen*-labeled commodities produce every year.

The reasons for this, I believe, are clear. Looking back to the historical trends which were discussed at the beginning of this paper, we can see that Suzuki and his cohort had a lot to do with the “de-branding,” or *genericide*, of *zen*. (In legal parlance, genericide is the phenomenon whereby a trademark holder loses intellectual property rights to its trademark as a result of the brand name becoming a generic referent in everyday language.) Recall that even before Suzuki stepped onto the stage, *Shin Bukkyō* ideologues like Shaku Sōen were engaged in a program of downplaying sectarian differences in favor of an umbrella label of “Eastern Buddhism.” When the Zen apologists gave credit for Japan’s military and cultural successes to Zen, they effectively switched labels: rather than Zen being attendant to Eastern Buddhism, the latter was subsumed under Zen—a trend that Suzuki in his lectures and writings only encouraged. However, the “killing blow” to the brand—the moment of genericide—came when Suzuki and his cohort convinced their Western audiences that Zen “has no philosophy of its own. Its teaching is concentrated on an intuitive experience, and the intellectual content of this experience can be supplied by a system of thought not necessarily Buddhist” (Suzuki, 1959: 44). By severing Zen from its institutional base and elevating it to be universally accessible to all religions—even going so far as to hyperbolize Zen as offering unmediated access to the very essence of all religious “truth”—Suzuki, his cohort, and his followers created *zen*, a concept which no longer rigidly signified the Japanese Zen institution. In this light, the genericide and consequent hypersignification of *zen* can actually be read as the final evolution of the *Shin Bukkyō* endeavor in the West: striving against an Orientalist and ethnocentric narrative that rejected Japanese Buddhism as hopelessly degenerate and backwards, what was ultimately conjured was a floating semiotic vessel that could simultaneously embody all of the attributes to which the West, uncomfortable in its own modernity, aspired.

If Zen was a brand when it entered the American popular consciousness, the freedom with which it is now used in advertising and marketing proves that it certainly is no longer. Had Zen retained its “brand-ness” in American popular culture—that is, its rigid designation as a religion, which for the most part it has retained in Japan—it is highly unlikely that it could have held the same allure for the three key demographic groups in the United States that were responsible for the initial burst of signification of *zen* during the 1950s and 60s. This semiosis accelerated as these threads became inextricably woven together—contradictions and all—in popular usage and in the marketing of consumer goods and services as part of the ‘post-Fordist’ shift in commodification and consumption patterns during the 1970s and 1980s (see Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013b),

ultimately shaping *zen* into the strange semiotic animal it is today. Indeed, the struggle of the Japanese Zen clergy to balance Zen's traditional ritual and social roles while attempting to embrace the surge of international popular interest in *zen* is evidence that, despite their best efforts, the centrifugal force of semiosis was ultimately too powerful for the clergy to retain institutional authority over the *zen* "brand" outside of Japan. In this regard, we can see the hypersignification of *zen* as a cautionary example for both corporations and religious institutions alike.

Perhaps the most significant development—and one that underscores the central argument of this paper—is that many among the Japanese Zen clergy recognize that *zen* may no longer necessarily rigidly designate a religion even in the Japanese cultural context. Linguistically, this distinction plays out most clearly in writing: consumer *zen* is distinguished by the use of Roman lettering (i.e., ZEN), while Zen in its traditional religious guise is indicated by using the Japanese *kanji* for Zen (禅). This subtle nuance actually carries substantial meaning. The use of Roman lettering for a Japanese word often indicates that its users perceive it as culturally distant, as if *zen* is a foreign loanword that is being imported *into* Japanese.¹⁰ This is an important shift, one that I believe indicates a certain degree of resignation towards a concept that is in many ways out of the Japanese clergy's hands, clearly demarcating the Zen they have authority over from the one that they don't.

Nevertheless, the relative preservation of the Zen religious "brand" in Japan allows for *zen* to be utilized in Japanese marketing without compromising its rigid designation or the authority of the "brand-holders." One example of this is the short-lived "Mercedes X Zazen" video campaign (released November 2013) which depicted meditating Zen monks becoming distracted by a Mercedes SUV skidding in a circle around them. The ostensible message of the video was that not even dedicated renunciate monks could resist being excited by a Mercedes, and the video ends with an image of a monk reverently bowing to the car. The difference between the American and Japanese commercial usages of Zen is striking: as we saw above, in the United States, deploying *zen* in advertising relies upon vague or ambiguous language to invoke positive associations that are largely provided by the consumer. In Japan, however, to invoke Zen conjures "traditional" religious images—to wit, robed Zen priests engaged in meditation on a misty, forested mountaintop. Interestingly, this video campaign was pulled from the Internet by Mercedes Japan almost as soon as it was launched, for reasons that are not readily apparent. The video itself does not appear to have created a scandal (or much buzz at all, as a matter of fact), but it would not be difficult to imagine a scenario where Zen sectarian authorities took issue with Mercedes Japan over the misappropriation of their "brand" and pressured for its removal, a possibility that would be virtually unthinkable in the United States.

Another potential advantage of maintaining the rigid designation of Zen in Japan is the possibility of reassociating religious Zen with successful commercial usages of consumer *zen*. A case in point is the Sōtō Zen sect's rediscovered relationship to Steve Jobs. In the

¹⁰ I know of no examples where *zen* is written in *katakana* as ゼン, which would be the usual means of rendering loanwords in Japanese.

wake of Jobs' death in October 2011, obituaries and biographies repeatedly emphasized the influence of Zen on Jobs' creative vision, and especially in his design philosophy for the globally popular Apple products. In particular, biographers pointed to his relationship with Chino Kōbun, an expatriate Sōtō Zen priest living in California during the 1970s and 1980s. Repeated media inquiries to the Sōtō Zen central administration led to the drafting of a statement "Concerning the Exchange between the Late Steve Jobs and the Late Chino (Otogawa) Kōbun" which was posted to the Sōtō Zen sect official website two weeks after Jobs' death.¹¹ While Jobs' connection to Sōtō Zen is certainly not spurious, the sudden spotlight on Sōtō Zen as part of the posthumous mythologizing of Steve Jobs presented the sect with a rare opportunity to publicly speak to its contributions to the global phenomenon of consumer *zen*. A conference hosted by Sōtō Zen International at Tokyo's Grand Hotel in February 2012 on the topic of "Steve Jobs and North American Zen" highlighted this connection to an audience comprised largely by Sōtō Zen clergy, parishioners, and adherents. At least for the Japanese attendees, this conference provided a forum for Sōtō Zen to reflect upon (and participate in) Jobs' considerable international cachet as a modern-day prophet of the cool, the cosmopolitan, and the cutting edge.

Throughout the Zen sects, clergy—especially of the younger generations—recognize that there is much to learn and potentially much to gain from *zen*'s global appeal, and some ambitious clergy are trying to strike the difficult balance of actively courting this interest while maintaining their ritual responsibilities to their parishioners and their sects. As I have described elsewhere (Irizarry, 2010), this trend has led to somewhat of an ideological schism at the seminary and sectarian level as to how the Zen clergy should proceed for the future, with both innovators and traditionalists trying to "steer the ship" in opposite directions. While similar debates are not uncommon within contemporary religions, the stakes may be higher for the Japanese Zen institution which must weigh the potential consequences of pursuing a hypersignified consumer *zen* at the cost of their own authority to determine what is "Zen" and what is not.

Conclusion

In tracing the evolution of "consumer *zen*" from its origins to its diverse and divergent contemporary usages, I have demonstrated how a careful and calculated redefining of Zen in the early twentieth century created the ideal conditions for *zen* to explode into the fascinating semiotic phenomenon it has become. Now ubiquitous in everyday language and consumer marketing in the United States, *zen* has taken on a life of its own as a floating signifier, a hypersignified "catch-all" usable by anyone as befits their needs. Nevertheless, *zen* remains tinted by cultural expectations of class, gender, and the "exotic Other," relics of the paths upon which *zen* evolved over the past fifty years. While this transformation has arguably been good for language and business, its benefits are less clear for the Japanese Zen institution which has largely lost control of its "brand-name" outside of Japan. I believe that by understanding these trajectories, we are enabled to recognize future possibilities for the global development of *zen* as a living religion, as an evolving idea, and as a lucrative commodity.

¹¹ <http://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/syumucyo/j20111018-2.html>, accessed March 3, 2014

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