R e s e a r c h   A r t i c l e

Down-to-Earth Zen: Zen *Buddhism in Japanese Manga and Movies*

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This paper analyzes some examples of the interconnections between Zen Buddhism and popular culture, notably *manga* and movies. In particular, it explores the recent *manga Bōzu days* (2007–2011) and the movies *Fancy Dance* (1989) and *Abraxas matsuri* (2010). In these works, Zen's everyday and down-to-earth character comes to the fore, while *zazen* meditation occupies a relatively small place. As amply explored by scholarly works over the last few decades, the former aspect is usually overlooked in Zen presentations in the West while the latter is in line with a view of this religious tradition that has been adapted for its dissemination outside of Japan. My analysis aims to shed light on how aspects of popular culture employ Zen Buddhist features to create commercial products that are meant to reach a wide audience, and how Zen Buddhism is represented in these products.

A visitor to Japan will be struck by the large number of *manga* (Japanese comics) and *anime* (animation movies) available on the market, as well as their related objects and businesses, such as souvenir items, resin and PVC figurines, and *manga* cafes.[1] These constitute a relevant part of Japan's cultural industry, as is also evident from the establishment of museums exclusively dedicated to *manga*. The Kyoto International Manga Museum and the recent Kitakyushu Manga Museum are good examples of the relevance of this genre in Japan. *Manga* and *anime* have been exported on a global scale: translations of *manga* are to be found in different languages, *anime* have gained high cultural recognition outside of Japan (see, for example, Miyazaki Hayao's works), and the *cosplay*[2] phenomenon is growing worldwide, just to cite a few instances. Moreover, based on my teaching experience in Germany and feedback from various colleagues worldwide, it has apparently become more common for university students to

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[1] The *manga* and *anime* industry occupies a prominent position in the Japanese media market (domestic Japanese *manga* sales amounted to 481 billion yen in 2006 and the *anime* market was worth over 27 billion dollars. In 2009, the overall sales for *manga* were 418.7 billion yen, which was equivalent to over 21.6% of book and magazine sales. See MacWilliams, 2008: 13; 2012: 597).

[2] *Costume play* consists of dressing like one's own favorite character taken from *manga*, *anime* and computer games.

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approach Japanese studies because of their interest in Japanese popular culture rather than in Zen/spirituality-related topics. As previous research has illustrated, religious elements are found among the countless products created by mainstream cultural industries and independent/self-financed groups related to such pop culture. At the same time, these forms of popular culture have been used by Japanese religious institutions to motivate followers and attract potential adherents (see for example, Ishii, 2010; Porcu, 2010; Inoue, 2012).

The film industry has been another vehicle for the global transmission of things Japanese. In this context, scholars of film studies have highlighted two crucial events in the postwar period: the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival won by Akira Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon* in 1951, which also marked "Japan's return to the international community after the war," and the acquisition by Sony of Columbia Pictures in 1989 (Tezuka, 2012: 3–4). These two events brought "the internationalization of Japanese cinema ... and the globalization of Japanese film finance" (ibid.). As in the case of *manga* and *anime*, religion-related topics are present in Japanese cinema through themes that range from Buddhism to Confucianism, Shintō, and New Religious Movements (cf. also Mitchell, 2011: 249–254).

For obvious reasons of space, in this paper I will focus on a limited number of examples in order to explore some of the aspects underlying the interconnection between Zen and popular culture in works not produced by religious institutions—that is, works complementary to those that Yamanaka Hiroshi has termed *kyōdan manga* (Yamanaka, 1996).[3] In particular, I explore a recent *manga, Bōzu days* (2007–2011), as well as two movies, *Fancy Dance* and *Aburakusasu no matsuri* (*Abraxas Festival*, hereafter *Abraxas no matsuri*), which are all focused on Zen Buddhism. The two films were released in 1989 and 2010 respectively and were presented at film festivals in the West. Although these case studies represent different media (*manga* and movies), and have been produced in different historical contexts and with different audiences in mind, they provide a significant example of how Zen Buddhism is presented in a fictional way. That is to say, they offer a perspective on Zen (a) from the viewpoint of temple family members, such as the youngest sister of the head priest (*Bōzu Days*) and a temple priest (*Abraxas no matsuri*); and (b) through a filmic adaptation of an award-winning *manga*, which is completely fictional and only partially reached the West. However, what is more interesting for our discussion is that in these works, Zen's every day and down-to-earth character—which is not exclusively, if at all, related to meditation—comes to the fore, while *zazen* occupies a relatively small place.[4] As amply explored by scholarly works in the last decades, the former aspect is usually overlooked in Zen presentations for a Western audience. Zen Buddhism's encounter with the West—and *vice versa*—has a long history that can be traced back to the nineteenth century and has brought about the

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[3] The term *kyōdan* means a religious community. In his article, Yamanaka (1996) provides an overview of different genres within the label of *shūkyō manga*, or religion-related *manga*.

[4] Many scholars have discussed the fact that *zazen* (sitting meditation) in Japan does not play a relevant role in everyday temple life (see, for example, Reader, 1986 and Borup, 2004). The examples selected in this article confirm this tendency. However, *zazen* has been—and still is—highlighted in popular representations of Zen Buddhism for the West.

creation of a (simplified and exotic) version of Zen for the West. Cultural hegemonic struggles as well as orientalist approaches to the subject, with all their consequences, have characterized this long-standing exchange between Japan (the East) and the West.[5] This is a history embedded in cultural, political, and economic forces that no longer allows us to treat Japan—or any other country—as an enclosed area (cf. Appadurai, 1996).

Movies are clearly a mass culture product of Western origins with a dominant and influential film industry in the United States (Hollywood).[6] Probably less evident is the Western influence on *manga*. However, while considered worldwide as 'exclusively' Japanese products and symbols of Japan's popular culture, they are the result of the intermingling of influences and cultures: Chinese, European, and North American models played a pivotal role in shaping *manga* and *anime*, as did the American postwar occupation with regard to the mass culture industry more broadly (see Ivy, 1993 and Berndt, 2008).[7] Therefore, as in other instances where the 'purity' and 'uniqueness' of a specific culture or religious denomination—such as in the case of the construction of a 'pure' form of Zen for the West—have revealed their limitations and inadequacy, so needs the 'uniqueness' of Japanese popular culture to be reconsidered in view of cultural contaminations and cross-pollinations occurring worldwide (cf. Allen and Sakamoto, 2006).

Against this backdrop, in the following sections I explore how forms of popular culture use Zen Buddhist features to create commercial products that are meant to reach a wide audience, and also how Zen is represented in these products.

The Everyday Life and Training of a Zen Priest in the *Manga Bōzu Days*

The *manga* artist Tokō Jun hails from a temple family belonging to Rinzai Zen and is the youngest sister of the head priest (*jūshoku*). In the *manga Bōzu days* (*The Days of a Buddhist Priest*) and *Bōzu days 2: O-tera to minna no mainichi* (*The Days of a Buddhist Priest 2: Everyday Life at the Temple*),[8] she describes the training her elder brother had to undertake in order to become a Zen priest and assume the administration of the family temple, as well as the daily activities at the same temple. The *manga* belongs to the so-called *komikku essei* ("comics essay") genre, i.e., *manga* that have an informative character and are connected with real persons and events. *Bōzu days* can be also included in the *o-bōsan*

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[5] The perception of Japanese Buddhism in Europe and America has been undoubtedly influenced by a form of Zen Buddhism that was tailored by a certain intellectual elite, both Japanese and non-Japanese, to be appealing for the "West," and characterized by orientalist/occidentalist traits. See Amstutz (1997), Faure (1991 and 1993), Sharf (1994 and 1995), Borup (2004), and Porcu (2008); cf. Yamada (2005).

[6] With regard to the modern period, the Japanese film industry was very prolific in the 1920s and 1930s and by 1937 it became one of the most productive in the world. Moreover, the role of film in the promotion of Japanese imperialism in Asia was crucial from the first screening in Japan in 1896 until the end of WWII (Baskett, 2008: 3). In this regard, the adoption of a Western (and Hollywood) contractual system was also decisive in the expansion of Japan's film industry in the second half of the 1930s (Standish, 2006: 34–35).

[7] This is, of course, not a one-way trajectory, given the strong position Japan occupies in the field of popular culture worldwide.

[8] The *manga* were first serialized in the *manga* magazines *Un poko* and *Uingusu* (2007–2011), which are published by Shinshokan. The two volumes were published by Shinshokan as well.

manga genre that sees Buddhist priests (*o-bōsan*) as its main characters.[9] These can be purely fictional, such as Okano Reiko's *Fanshī dansu* (*Fancy Dance*, 1984–1990), which was also adapted into a movie; *Bussen: Technical School of Buddhism* (1999–2001) by Miyage Ranjō; the recent *Bōzu rabu* (*Buddhist Priest Love*, 2010) by Matsumoto Tomo; and *O-shitai mōshi agemasu* (*Sorry for Being Attached*) by Saku Yukizō (2012)—to cite just a few.[10]

Conversely, *Bōzu days* is not a fictional story but is based on the real life of a head priest. Any reference to the real character and his family is, however, omitted. Apart from their affiliation to Rinzai Zen, neither the name of the temple nor that of the monastery where he underwent his training are mentioned. The head priest is simply called "older brother," and has the Japanese character *ani* drawn on his forehead. His transformation from a layperson into a Zen priest is depicted in a positive way: once a student of a Buddhist university, who liked philosophy and was fixated on calligraphy (*shodō otaku*) and hairstyles, he turns into a Zen priest surrounded by a nice aura (*kireina ōra*) and with his head shaved (Tokō, 2009: 13–14).

In *Bōzu days*, the story follows the main character's path from his training at the monastery to his investiture as head priest and closes with his wedding ceremony. The readers are helped with explanations regarding life at the monastery, such as the procedure for novices (*niwazume*, *tangazume*, and the admission to the training); the training itself; the daily schedule; the preparation of the meals by the cook master (*tenzo*); *zazen* practice; and begging for alms (*takuhatsu*) (Tokō, 2009: 35). The story related to the training of the future head priest in the *sōdō* (Sangha hall) is at one point interrupted by a section dedicated to graves (Tokō, 2009: 77–84). Apart from providing some information on graves and the right etiquette at the gravesite, mention is made also about new practices such as visiting family graves (*o-haka mairi*) online and *jumokuzō* ("tree funerals," where the ashes of the deceased are buried under a tree)[11] (Tokō, 2009: 81, 84). The relevance given to this aspect in the *manga* is somehow revelatory of the ambiguous position occupied by contemporary Japanese Buddhism in relation to funerary rites. Temples and religious institutions are trying to jettison the pejorative label of "funeral Buddhism" but, at the same time, these rites are a relevant source of income for Buddhist temples.[12] Indeed, among the main concerns of head priests in contemporary Japan is the decrease of funeral services as well as the recent phenomenon to transfer one's ancestors' grave from their original temple of affiliation to other facilities once the family moves to another city. Moreover, an increasing number of people are opting for funeral services provided by private companies or other funerals not linked to Buddhism, or religion in general. All this affects the revenue of temples and urges their head priests to find other ways of generating income. This

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[9] See also the event "O-bōsan manga no sekai" ("The World of Buddhist Priests *Manga*"), organized in 2011 by Ōsaka University and Kyōto Seika University International Manga Research Center (http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/info/files/2012/04/PR_110819_mangacafe.pdf).

[10] See also other *manga*, such as *Sansukumi* by Kinuta Murako that features three priests belonging to Buddhism, Christianity and Shintō.

[11] With regard to funerals not related to religion, such as natural funerals and tree funerals, see also Shimazono (2012: 210).

[12] This is evident, for example, from various promotional activities carried out by local temples. See, for example, Nelson (2011 and 2013) and Porcu (2014a).

concern can be seen as a reason why activities linked to funerals are not excluded from this *manga*, but rather presented as something positive and necessary.

Another aspect that comes to the fore in this *manga* is the image of this temple, and Zen Buddhism in general, as open-minded and ready to include other traditions in its space as well. Here, we find Santa Claus dressed in black Buddhist robes, thus called Black Santa (*burakku santa*), who brings presents to the youngest sister; *danka* members[13] who offer Christmas cakes to the head priest and his family; and a decorated Christmas tree placed in one room of the temple (Tokō, 2009: 96-97). However, in the text it is made clear that neither the *honzan* (head temple) nor the training monasteries celebrate this Christian festivity (Tokō, 2009: 99) and that this celebration remains confined to the individual level and does not involve the Rinzai institution. Incidentally, this aspect of the *manga* reflects the popularity and commercial value of Christmas in Japan and its global character.

In most of its popular presentations for the West, Zen is strictly linked to meditation (*zazen*), and presented as a philosophy and a "way of life." Much has been written with regard to *zazen* and its reception—and emphasis—in the West, as opposed to the lack of interest in this practice by Zen Buddhist members and priests in a Japanese context (see also Borup in this volume). But how is *zazen* presented in this *manga* and the movies analyzed below? *Zazen* appears for the first time when Tokō Jun describes the monks' training (Tokō, 2009: 14) and is presented as an activity linked to the monastery, to austerity, and to strict rules (see, for example, ibid.: 124–135). In particular, a section is dedicated to the one-week intensive *zazen* practice called the *rōhatsu ōzesshin* (awakening day *sesshin*) that takes place from December 1 to 8. This practice, which commemorates the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment, is described as particularly harsh, at times causing hallucinations. Its completion is welcome by the trainee monks with a liberating "It's finished!!" (*Owattaa!!*) (ibid.: 135).[14]

The hardship of this practice clearly emerges in *Bōzu days* in both the depiction of the *rōhatsu ōzesshin* and the *mondō* practice—the latter being closely linked to the master-disciple relationship. Within the monastery, the *rōshi* (old master) is presented as a feared monk. However, his image changes when he is invited to the main character's temple for the ceremony that inaugurates him as a head priest. On this occasion, the *rōshi*, who is also called *Zen no ekisupāto* (Zen expert), is portrayed as a wise and cute old priest, a cool (*kakkoii*) "idol" (*aidoru*) (see ibid.: 141–146, 148) who is also aware of the

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[13] In Japan, supporting families (*danka*) financially sustain the temple. This is a centuries-old system of temple patronage.

[14] Interesting in this regard is a blog run by a young Zen priest (b. 1983) of Aichi prefecture, who completed his three-year training in 2010. The blog is titled *Zenshū o-bōsan no buroggu fukyō* (*The Proselytizing Blog of a Zen Buddhist Priest*) and aims at introducing the "lifestyle" (*raifu sutairu*) of Zen priests. The blog is very colorful and full of animated emoticons. Here the *rōhatsu ōzesshin* is explained as the strictest period of training (*kibishii shugyō*) during the year. According to the priest blogger, although it was a painful experience during his second and third years of training, as a first-year novice the harshness of this special practice was difficult to forget throughout the whole year. This feeling is also visually expressed through an animated emoticon meaning desperation/agony, and the word for pain (*itai/itami*) is recurrent. http://ameblo.jp/gen-maru/entry-10725799387.html (accessed 28 November 2012).

entertainment scene in the secular world. In one of the *manga* panels, the Zen master, referring to celibacy, makes thumbs up sign and says "*Gū*" (good). If we consider the period when the *manga* was written, this is most likely linked to the famous joke/buzzword of the female comedian Edo Harumi. Her "*Gū!*" buzzword was pervasive in TV programs in Japan some years ago and in 2008 it won the U-Can Buzzword Competition (Ryūkōgo Taishō). Through this updated link with the world of TV entertainment, the figure of the *rōshi* becomes more approachable to the readers and he is not merely presented as an old, scary monk confined to his monastery. Zen is 'branded' here through a well-known and successful TV personality. [15] Such representation of Buddhism echoes marketing strategies used by religious groups (also in collaboration with commercial enterprises) to 'update' the image of Buddhism and address their adherents and potential converts. This work shows the concerns of a family temple member and her attempt to promote Zen Buddhism as a tradition worthy of interest and relevance for today's society. This is in line with similar representations of Zen and other forms of Buddhism in Japan. Moreover, this is also reflected in activities linked to popular culture that are undertaken by Buddhist temples at the local level to overcome a condition where Buddhism is seen as exclusively linked to funerary rites and memorials for ancestors and thus proposes Buddhism as a lively force able to draw younger generations.

Fancy and Gloomy: Two Filmic Representations of Zen

Two different sides of Zen are presented in the following movies that stem from a *manga* and a novel respectively. *Fancy Dance*, which is set in a training monastery and shows the monastic life of a group of male monks, is characterized by humorous and light traits. Conversely, *Abraxas no matsuri* (*Abraxas Festival*) brings us into a local temple and revolves around a Buddhist priest afflicted by anxiety and psychological problems.

Fancy Dance

Fancy Dance (*Fanshī dansu*, 1984–1990) is a famous and award-winning *manga* written by Okano Reiko. Its filmic adaptation was directed by Suo Masayuki and released in 1989. Despite its popularity in Japan, the *manga* was not translated into English, and, unlike several Japanese *manga* and *anime*, it has remained a local success. The movie, on the other hand, reached the West, although it was presented at film festivals (in the US with the title *Manic Zen*), but not in movie theaters. [16] Here, I will focus in particular on the movie that was made while the *manga* was still in progress.

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[15] Elsewhere, referring to the *anime Shinran sama* produced by the Honganji-ha of Shin Buddhism, I have noticed how the employment of "top talents" coming from the entertainment business not only lends prestige to these products, but it is also a way for the religious institution itself to find reinforcement and validation through such collaborations (Porcu, 2010). In a very different setting, see also the use of popular movie characters, such as ET and Yoda, in Tezuka Osamu's famous *manga Buddha* (MacWilliams, 2000: 123–124).

[16] See "Eight Questions for Masayuki Suo, The Director of "Shall We Dance." *Indiwire*, July 11, 1997. http://www.indiewire.com/article/eight_questions_for_masayuki_suo_the_director_of_shall_we_dance

The main character, Yōhei (Motoki Masahiro), is the oldest son of a Zen temple family who has to undergo a one-year-long period of training in a monastery in order to become a Zen priest. He is the leader of a rock band in Tokyo and although he has no interest in pursuing his father's career as a *jūshoku* (head priest), he is compelled to do it. The first scene of *Fancy Dance* shows a group of monks leaving a mountain temple to go begging for alms (*takuhatsu*). Immediately afterwards, the scene intermingles with a rock concert by Yōhei. Symbolically he is presented with a 'two-identity' hairstyle, which represents both his secular life (long hair) and his future secluded life as a trainee monk (shaved head). In this scene, the cutting of his hair has a ritual character: his friends in turn shave Yōhei's head, the last being his girlfriend.

The Zen training, which is also undertaken by his younger and handsome brother, Ikuo, is depicted from the very beginning in a harsh and almost military way. The first time both brothers are refused—more exactly, thrown away—because they had some Shintō amulets among their belongings. Similarly, in *Bōzu days*, although in a different vein, the director gives space to various ceremonial activities at the monastery, such as eating, cleaning, and cooking, as well as some rituals. The contrast between the hardship of the training and the necessity of the monks to satisfy their worldly desires and their longing for a life outside the monastery, as well as the bullying of novices by senior monks, are recurrent patterns. While the novices suffer because of strict training schedules and privations, the latter are shown in their quarters indulging in forbidden activities, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, eating sushi, listening to music, and screening pictures of possible wives (*omiai* pictures). Breaching the rules is however not limited to senior monks. The abbot himself is shown eating sushi and drinking beer in his room. Moreover, in one of the scenes where he is scolding Yōhei because of his lack of seriousness during the training, Yōhei's eyes/the camera moves to various appliances in the head priest's quarters (fridge, air conditioning, stereo). This clearly links the monk to the "secular" world and reveals his being unable to fully accept a secluded life. The contrast between life within and outside the monastery is also presented through a few scenes that show the disjunction between the monks' secluded lives and everyday life at the family temple, including those in which Yōhei's father appears while singing karaoke, drinking, and enjoying himself.

In both the *manga* and the filmic adaptation of *Fancy Dance*, the main characters, in particular Ikuo and Yōhei, are presented as handsome, cool, cute, and *oshare* (fashionable). In this regard, the fact that we are dealing with a *shōjo manga*, i.e., a work that addresses a female audience, is clear, for example, in the scene where a group of high school girls visit the temple to see Ikuo. After conducting a *zazen* session for a high school group the young monk became very popular among the girls who even founded an Ikuo fan club. Here, words like *kakkoii*, *kawaii*,[17] and *oshare* are used with reference to him and other good-looking monks.

Various rituals are shown in this movie, such as the *rōhatsu sesshin* (awakening day *sesshin*), and the *hossenshiki* (Dharma combat ceremony). In the latter, the designated head seat (*shuso*) replies, in place of the abbot, to the questions of the monks gathered in

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17 This is a very popular word meaning cute, pretty, adorable, tiny, sweet, sexy, childish.

the assembly hall. In the *manga* and the movie, Yōhei has been designated as the head seat. This is the last event in the movie. Here, the contrast between the world represented by his girlfriend and his family is emphasized. His girlfriend and his Tokyo friends collectively symbolize the "modern" and secular side of Japanese society as well as the bubble economy of the late 1980s, and they do not understand or approve of monastic life. On the contrary, for Yōhei's family, which symbolizes the religious aspect (temple family), his role as *shuso* is for them no doubt a moment of pride. Similar to the case of *Bōzu days*, the overall representation of Buddhism in this movie is not conditioned by negative models. Although the occasional misbehavior of monks is portrayed, it is noticeable that their image succeeds in remaining relatively "cool" (*o-bōsan ga kakkoi*). Taken as a whole, down-to-earth religious life is made to appear certainly not less worthy than its secular counterpart.

Abraxas no matsuri

In a vein similar to *Fancy Dance*, *Abraxas no matsuri* starts with a punk rock concert performed by the main character, Jōnen. The scene then moves to the grounds of a school where Jōnen, in his Buddhist robes, is taking some pills. He hears indistinct voices. In the school hall he miserably fails in his role as Zen priest because he is not able to give a speech and leaves the hall amidst teachers' complaints and students' laughter. From the very beginning, Jōnen's anxiety and mental discomfort are presented to the audience. The movie is directed by Katō Naoki and is based on the 2001 novel by Gen'yū Sōkyū (b. 1956). Gen'yū is the head priest of Fukujūji, a Rinzai Zen temple in Fukushima prefecture.[18] His novel belongs to the life-advise genre and is written as a "trendy, religio-therapeutic non-fiction" (Gebhardt, 2012: 566). The movie is centered around Jōnen (Watanabe Kenji aka Suneohair), a failed rock musician and a manic-depressive monk who is struggling with his anxieties and neurotic tendencies. After his suicide attempt at the age of 27, he has been treated with psychotropic drugs and has tried to cope with his condition through alcohol. He works at a local temple where the head priest, Genshū (Kobayashi Kaori), and his wife, Asako (Honjō Manami), support him. Rock music is Jōnen's passion and escape. For this reason, Genshū and his wife help him organize a rock concert on the temple grounds despite the head priest's apprehension about the music Jōnen would play (*hageshii*, or violent/extreme) and the reaction of the parishioners. The rock concert organized and performed by Jōnen is a transformative and liberatory moment that enables him to face his demons. The Zen in both the novel and the movie is also "an intercultural hippie-Zen," mediated through Abraxas, a gnostic god with no connection whatsoever with Zen Buddhism, who is also a figure in the novel *Demian* by Hermann Hesse (Gebhardt, 2012: 566-567). Moreover, the main character's interest in and turn to Zen have been influenced by western models, such as David Bowie's experience with meditation, and esoteric writings popular in Japan in the 1970s (cf. Gebhardt, 2012: 567). Zen is 'westernized' here through rock and esotericism.

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[18] Since 2009 he has been visiting professor of contemporary Zen studies at Hanazono University in Kyoto, acording to Gen'yū Sōkyū's official website http://www.genyu-sokyu.com/profile/index.html (accessed December 4, 2012).

The scenes related to religious events in the movie present no other rituals apart from funerals. The suicide committed by one of the members of the community, Hōhei, is a turning point in the story. Throughout the first half of the movie, Jōnen fails as a priest, both during the school and Hōhei's funeral service scenes. Here, overwhelmed by affliction, he stops beating the *mokugyo* (fish-shaped wooden drum), and later on refuses to perform his duty as Genshū's assistant at the funeral. On this occasion, tormented by his fears, Jōnen leaves his home, drives to the sea, brings his electric guitar, and starts playing it. This is one of the moments in the movie where Jōnen's struggling nature clearly emerges. He places his electric guitar and amplifier on a rock in the winter sea and starts playing wildly until this leads to an unsurprising short circuit. Jōnen's states of mind are constantly accompanied in the movie by a changing soundtrack. In this scene, the distorted tunes and the subsequent short circuit best represent the Zen priest's inner conflicts. After this performance, he furiously screams his rage towards the ocean while the distorted guitar music continues. As the music abruptly stops, he finds peace and is able to return home. This can be seen as a sort of sudden enlightenment experience. For the first time Jōnen is now able to perform his priestly duties without running away. Symbolically, his first religious service performed alone takes place where Hōhei committed suicide. This scene leads to the second part of the movie that focuses on the preparation of the concert on Genshū's temple grounds. During the concert—and its preparation—the religious/traditional aspect is linked to the local community that operates around the temple, while the secular/rock aspect is embodied by people coming from afar, from Tokyo's urban environment, as we have seen in a similar guise in *Fancy Dance.*

Zazen does not play a significant role in this movie. The story is related to the everyday life of a temple and the unusual events that develop around Jōnen's personal difficulties. An exception is made when, the night before the concert, Jōnen meditates in the small apartment where he lives with his wife, Tae (Tomosaka Rie) and their five-year-old son. Here, for the first time, the word Abraxas appears in the sentence "Namu Aburakusasu" (I take refuge in Abraxas). This saying is uttered by Jōnen and his wife as a sort of mantra, while he sits in *zazen* in front of a mirror. Abraxas refers to a god that embodies both good and evil, and, according to the novelist and Jōnen, it implies that individuals have to accept themselves as they are (*sono mama de ii, sono mama de tadashiinda*).[19] The need for such an acceptance is the final message of the movie. In the trailer and the poster, this message is also expressed through the sentence *nayameru o-bōsan ga, ikiru hinto o oshiete kureru* (an afflicted Buddhist priest teaches us some hints to live), which clearly reveals the educational role of Zen in this case and the work's "religio-therapeutic" function mentioned above.

The concert at the temple begins on a sunny day and Jōnen performs in his Buddhist robes (although he will conclude it half-naked). Again, music plays a relevant role. The distorted, punk rock music is a manifestation of the overall mood of the movie and its main character, who plays wildly and smashes his guitar on the stage. The role of Jōnen's wife, Tae, is relevant too. She is a determined woman who supports her husband throughout his difficulties and accepts him as he is. She works at a supermarket, has to

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[19] See also the interview to Gen'yū Sōkyū on the DVD.

endure the residents' complaints towards her husband's peculiar behavior, and serves as a linkage between her husband/their family and the community. The movie ends with Jōnen leaving the temple to carry out his priestly duties, while the notes of the renowned *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen fade away in the background.

Contrasting tones and moods are a characteristic of *Abraxas no matsuri*. Jōnen's changing states of mind—wild/violent/crazy/apathetical vs. soft/calm/reasonable—are a constant in this movie. Apart from the music, his moods are accompanied by the use of colors and locations: cold/warm colors, interior/exterior locations. External locations are liberating; internal environments are narrow and somehow depressing. For example, it is in the car that Jōnen hears voices, and in their small apartment he seems entrapped in his problems. Conversely, the Zen temple run by Genshū and his wife functions as a neutral and relaxing environment. The temple is neat and clean, and is characterized by soft and warm colors that reflect the friendly atmosphere created by the temple couple.

Abraxas no matsuri is centered on a down-to-earth image of Zen Buddhism, an image that is linked to the everyday activities at local temples, the care of the *danka* members, funerary rites, administrative duties, and the relationship between the temple and the outer community—which can be also conflictual.[20] At the same time, it revolves around the daily life of a young family with conventional roles: the husband/father, Jōnen, works as a Zen priest; and the wife/mother is employed in a supermarket, administers the quite restricted family budget, is in charge of the education of their son, and communicates with the neighborhood community. The image of cool priests, as emerged from both the *manga Bōzu days* and the movie *Fancy Dance*, is far from being a characteristic of this movie. Rather, Jōnen is often addressed by his wife as *baka* (idiot, fool). He is a very fragile figure who does not encounter the sympathy of the locals (apart from a few exceptions), while Genshū is respected by the community—supportive, calm, and down-to-earth, but surely not the "cool" and fashionable type of priest. The unease suffered by individuals, which also turns into suicide, is one of the main focal points of *Abraxas no matsuri*. No space is given here to mystical images of Zen Buddhism, and, unlike the two other examples analyzed here, there is no emphasis on *zazen*.

Conclusion

I have analyzed the connection of Zen Buddhism with popular culture, in particular with reference to *manga* and movies produced by non-religious institutions and the image of Zen Buddhism as it emerges from popular commercial works. My aim was not to ascertain the effective impact of such productions, but the dynamics underlying such popularization of Zen Buddhism. Thus, I have illustrated how Japanese popular culture formats have made use of Zen Buddhist features to create commercial products that intend to attract a broad audience, and how these also may serve as a promotion of Zen Buddhism—two of the three products being closely linked to the real life of Zen Buddhist priests and temples.

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[20] These activities at local temples are not only to be found in Zen temples, but in other denominations as well.

The representation of Zen Buddhism in *Bōzu days* and *Fancy Dance* is characterized by "cool" traits and by the use of a language that ensures the up-to-datedness of the product and is mainly addressed to a young public. Stylistically, the *manga Bōzu days* is full of 'Japanized' English words, for example, *denjarasu* (dangerous) replaces *abunai*, and *ekisupāto* (expert) is used in place of *senmonka*. We have also seen that the use of famous TV buzzwords (Edo Harumi's "*Gū!*") by the old Zen master is a way to make this figure more approachable and, to some extent, ensure that Zen Buddhism moves along with the times. *Fancy Dance*—with its origins as a *shōjo manga*—makes use of a language suited to an audience of young women through words such as *kawaii*, *oshare* (smart, fashionable), and *kakkoii*. The final message is clear: Zen monks and Zen Buddhism are not disconnected from their surrounding reality.

Abraxas matsuri also shows a connection to social realities but it follows another trajectory, one characteristic of a post-bubble historical era. It is not based on a *manga*, but on a novel written by a Zen Buddhist priest, and it aims to highlight individuals' anxieties and fragilities. There is no room for fashionable priests here. The movie describes the path of a man who does not belong to a temple family—unlike the previous examples—but has chosen to become a Zen priest, also through some experiences related to western models, in an attempt to face his inner conflicts as well as problems with drugs, alcohol, and mental illness.

As mentioned above, the role played by music is pivotal in these works: all of the characters are members of rock or punk music bands. Playing western music is presented as a way of seeking freedom from strict rules, such as those related to the hereditary system of Buddhist temples—according to which the first son would succeed his father in the administration of the temple. In *Bōzu days*, for example, the head priest's friends struggle between their musical aspirations and their obligation towards their family temple (Tokō, 2009: 46), and the same happens to the main character (and various priests of different denominations I talked to in Japan). Similarly, Yōhei in *Fancy Dance* had to renounce being a rock musician in order to pursue his father's career as the head priest of a Zen temple. Moreover, music can also be a way out of personal problems and anxieties. This aspect comes to the fore in *Abraxas no matsuri*, where music is a way for Jōnen to work on his demons, and, (probably) in the end, be accepted by the community of parishioners.

Another aspect that has emerged from these examples—and is closely related to the way Zen Buddhism is perceived outside of Japan—is the practice of *zazen*, or sitting meditation. This form of meditation has been mainly related to the hardship and training within the monastery, but has not played a key role in the daily context at the local temples. On the contrary, emphasis has been placed on aspects related to funerary services, communication with the *danka* members, and details connected to the temple routine. This emphasis also reflects the way Zen Buddhist temples are administered in Japan, where priority is given to daily business, including memorial services and

funerals, i.e., their relevant source of income, and where *zazen* does not usually find relevant space in day-to-day practices.[21]

To sum up, in the examples analyzed above, there is hardly space for aspects that are usually highlighted in mainstream representations of Zen Buddhism made for the West. Here, this tradition has been partially depicted as devoted to meditation (*zazen*) and philosophy, and its institutional and daily aspects have been very often ignored. Rather, the instances in this paper, although limited in numbers, can be taken as an indication that Zen Buddhism in Japanese popular culture may be presented in ways that are alternative to the orientalist/occidentalist stereotype. Time will tell if the growing interest in Japanese popular culture at the global level would also be a vehicle to re-shape the image of Zen as it is perceived in the West and help provide a more colorful and down-to-earth picture of this tradition.

Acknowledgements

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[21] On the contrary, the recent Japanese movie *Zen*, directed by Takahashi Banmei (2009), presents a rather idealized version of the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), following his hagiography. Here, emphasis is placed on *zazen*. Moreover, the image of Zen as an 'inner experience', which was also influenced by William James's ideas, as proposed by D. T. Suzuki and other intellectuals, such as Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji and Abe Masao, continues to exercise a subtle but nonetheless decisive influence on this and similar representations of Zen in Japan (for an analysis of the movie *Zen*, see Porcu, 2014b).

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