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Asian Folk Religion and Cultural Interaction

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‘Cultural interaction’ is a theme that is gaining increasing attention from humanities scholars, and for a good reason. Do ‘cultures’ interact? If ‘cultures’ exist, what happens in their centers, peripheries, and borderlines wherein the so-called ‘contact zones’ (as described by Mary Louise Pratt) are said to emerge?¹ In fact, should one consider ‘culture’ a totally stable entity that exists only within the boundaries of a nation-state, affecting and receiving influences from other similar entities of a fixed nature? Or should one think of it as a constantly shifting network of relationships that absorbs, negotiates, or rejects new ideas, practices, groups of people, and metaphors, while adapting them to the pre-existing and future settings that also continue to change? While scholars argue over the definitions, it is becoming evident that the diverse processes of such absorption, negotiation, rejection, and adaptation manifest themselves abundantly in the field of religious expression. Different or comparable forms of such expression found in a variety of geographical sites and locations make one ponder on the nature of culturally situated religiosity and question

1 The notion of the ‘contact zone’ was introduced by Mary Louise Pratt in her work on travel writing in the colonial context of South America. It is now used in a variety of scientific fields, often with further elaboration on Pratt’s original wording. Mary Louise Pratt. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge.

the relations between the religiosities developing in multi-sited cultural contexts.

Yoshihiro Nikaidō's new book (or rather, an English translation of the articles written originally in Japanese) seeks to highlight the abovementioned complexities through presenting an ample collection of empirical data. Consisting of two sections and six chapters, this densely written volume focuses on the 'cultural interaction' and the role the so-called Sinitic gods play in it, as they become embedded into the contexts of local Buddhist temples in specific regions of Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Okinawa. The choice of these locations is important, as they rarely get discussed together within the framework of a broader area comprising parts of East and Southeast Asia. In this respect, Nikaidō's study published in English presents a helpful contribution to the field of religious studies, despite certain structural issues and presentation that at its core caters more to the expectations of the Japanese academe rather than to those of an international scholarly audience.

Chapter 1 of Section I begins with an investigation of itineraries of the so-called 'temple guardian gods' (Ch. *jialanshen*, Jp. *garanjin*). According to Nikaidō's argument, these deities should be considered as transcending the maritime space, crossing over from the coastal and terrestrial areas of Southern Song China to the new settings of the Zen Buddhist temples in Japan during the Kamakura period (1185–1336). Nikaidō notes the importance of maritime links and routes of communication between the monastic centers of China and Japan, highlighting the significance of Buddhist temples in coastal areas of Kyushu and Kantō, particularly the Five Mountain temples. He discovers that some of the divine figures, crossing over the sea and establishing themselves in new local contexts, may have originated from local district deities (Ch. *chenghuangshen*) and the earth gods (Ch. *tudishen*) of China and others represented the deities of water,

sea, celestial or subterranean bureaucracy; although the worship of such deities continued to thrive in Japan, it almost disappeared in China.

Chapter 2 shifts its focus onto the incorporation of the Chinese temple guardian deities within the Ōbaku Zen temples during the Edo period (1600–1868). The backgrounds of the gods of wealth such as Wutong and Wuxian, along with the Buddhist deity Huaguang Dadi are investigated against the Buddhist, Daoist, and popular literary sources, and their representation as sculptures appearing within the temple halls emerges as material evidence testifying to the significance of Sino-Japanese cultural and religious transfer.

Chapters 3 and 4 are structured along the same pattern and focus on the Chinese, Korean, and Buddhist deities, such as Zhenwu Dadi, the star deity Myōken Bosatsu, the figure of a prince from Paekche, and *bodhisattva* Kṣitigarbha, which after the locally mediated transformations came to play significant roles in Chinese and Japanese religious history. Here, although the material is interesting, the reader specializing in East Asian religions might wonder at the specificities of the argument's flow or why works by Western scholars that specifically deal with the history of adaptations of the Buddhist deity Kṣitigarbha in premodern China and Japan are not mentioned here.² The narrative's temporal framework also has to shift back to the Kamakura period, thus causing a significant structural tension within the whole study; the necessity of such shift in the middle of the book otherwise remains unexplained. Although the author is careful to mention the Daoist and esoteric Buddhist sources and histories, in truth, such foray simply demonstrates that the 'crossing over' of Chinese and Buddhist deities to Japan happened on a considerable scale before the Kamakura

2 Zhiru. 2007. *The Making of a Saviour Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China*, a Kuroda Institute Book, Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press; Hank Glassman. 2012. *The Face of Jizō: Image and Cult in Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

period and thus has a far longer history in East Asia than the current study tries to present.

The two chapters of Section II discuss the Sinitic deities transmitted to other parts of Asia, namely, within the context of Buddhist and Confucian temples found in Taiwan and Singapore (chapter 1) as well as Okinawa and the areas of western Kyushu, where Chinese immigration was most significant (chapter 2). Although these settings represent specific conditions that differ significantly from each other (Singapore, for instance, does not only have Buddhist and Daoist but also Hindu temples and mosques), but they share the aspect of multiplicity of different religious traditions and thriving religious environment. The worship of the gods of literacy and immortals promising success in civil examinations as well as Guandi and maritime deities such as dragon gods and Mazu features prominently in these two chapters.

The advantage and contribution of this book is that the author brings many examples of the deities of Sinitic origins that were 'transplanted' and appropriated within a Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, and Okinawan contexts. The study thus explores not only the already well-known locations, but takes the reader to the maritime and coastal areas of Japan and Okinawa, which so far have not featured in Western scholarship on Japanese religions too often. As the book's narrative unfolds, the role of Buddhist monks (particularly, those hailing from Zen temples), merchants, seafarers, and immigrants who are implicated in transportation and local adaptations of deities and religious practices associated with them, gradually comes to the fore. The illustrations reproduced from the wood-block printed books as well as the colour photographs of the deities' sculptures currently found in temples of Fujian, Mingzhou, and Sichuan in China, Taiwan, or Kamakura, Kyoto, Hirado, Nagasaki, and Fukushima in Japan, and other locations across East Asia, will certainly be of interest to

a broad audience of readers and constitute one of the book's advantages; the photographs attest to the empirical data and multiplicity of locations visited by the author as a part of extensive field trips.

Although these contributions are significant and the study's scope makes for a number of thought-provoking conclusions, the book does not explain or venture out into the domain of a more decisive theoretical discussion regarding the nature of 'cultural interactions' featuring in the book's title and throughout the study. The Japanese concept of *yūgaku* (study of mobility, peregrination) is mentioned only as a citation of a journal's title featuring prominently in the author's work. This is one item that could have been fruitfully explored, to foreground the geographical distribution of the Sinitic deities within the wider East and Southeast Asia. Examining this concept in more detail would also have helped to cast more light on the movements of people who operated behind these religious phenomena, as well as on the socio-economic and political circumstances that manifest alongside the very processes of 'cultural interaction.' In fact, this concept in its broad formulation might approach what Stephen Greenblatt and his co-authors have termed 'cultural mobility'; a concept that, among similar scholarly terms aimed at elucidating the global movements of ideas and practices, is gaining traction within academic circles.³

The other vital concept emerging from this study is the aspect of entanglement, that is, of processes that take place when a new entity arrives in a new environment, which prompts a reconfiguration of the local context and of the entity itself to resolve the inevitable tensions and incompatibility. It is partially fleshed out in a discussion of interaction and entanglements between different religious ideas and practices important in East Asia's history, such as Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and

3 Stephen Greenblatt et al. 2010. *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the worship of local deities. Although the term 'cultural interaction' is often cited within Nikaidō's study, it is not really dealt with in a sufficient theoretical depth to the extent that might be expected by a Western reader; neither are the issues of the colonial history or historically situated analysis of migration explicitly addressed or provided. Rather, following the conventions of Japanese academic writing, it is expected that the term's substance would appear clear to the reader from the very structure of the book and the particular set of cited empirical data. The book's focus on 'folk religion' is another academic construction that longs to be more critically contextualized and dissected. The study demonstrates that the forms of popular religious expression, especially, the ancestral deities' cults, should be seen as the very sites of 'cultural interaction.' On the other hand, it helps to bear in mind that the use of terms such as 'folk religion,' 'culture,' or 'influences' as static categories of analysis may also be misconstrued as a circumstance that allows the study to touch upon the colonial backgrounds and intra-Asian migration in the Chinese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean histories only tentatively.

There are some small mistakes and translational issues that may make the text appear confusing for non-specialist academic readers. Equally distracting are the uneven transliteration of Chinese titles or abundance of lists of the Chinese terms left un-translated and without a proper context; the English translations of Buddhist and Daoist scriptures may need better referencing. The study would have benefited from including maps that highlight the movement of deities and groups of people as well as the locations of temples discussed throughout the book. That being said, specialist scholars might find this book useful for its breadth of geographical, religious, and textual references that might not otherwise be available in English. It is a result of a recent Japanese academic endeavor into the empirical and theoretical issues of global movements of religious

ideas and practices and their local manifestations and entanglements that has been facilitated by the research excellence initiative (COE) at the Kansai University in Osaka. The book brings into focus a broad range of literary and religious sources and elucidates the mobile nature of the popular religious practices within diverse geographical areas of East and Southeast Asia. Imperfections aside, it is certainly a welcome attempt.

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