

Sounds and Silences: A Counterresponse

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IN DEBATES between writers and their reviewers it is not at all unusual for both to so disagree that they end up convinced that each has been thoroughly misrepresented by the other. Just as William LaFleur cannot recognize much of his book in my treatment of it, neither can I see much of my review in his response. But rather than being perplexed or dismayed, I am actually delighted that my review still managed to raise issues that LaFleur considered real enough to warrant a response two-and-a-half times as long as the review itself.

I am not interested in defending myself against the author's accusations that I have played academic dirty pool, engaged in moral posturing, replaced descriptive statements with normative ones, pressed an it's-time-to-clean-house agenda, denigrated popular Buddhism as inauthentic, moved the net after I hit the tennis ball, and so forth. I leave it to the readers of our exchange to judge whether or not I am guilty. I also leave it to our readers to read or reread *Liquid Life* to see for themselves if I have characterized it wrongly.

I used the word *pro* simply to mean "for," as opposed to "against." But if "proabortion" is too fraught with objectionable contemporary political insinuations then I shall be happy to stay with LaFleur's own terminology and say "condone" abortion.

My view of the book, then, to reiterate briefly, is that LaFleur: 1) describes an Edo-period Buddhism that clandestinely condoned abortion and infanticide by using the language of returning the child; 2) claims that modern Japanese women have been able to use Buddhism to help them deal with the dilemmas of abortion; and 3) provides very little evidence to support 1) and 2).

My basic criticism has to do with evidence, and particularly with the use of silence as evidence. I am specifically concerned that evidence should support historical truth rather than serve the purposes of speculation or implicit moral prescription. Casting me as a moralist who distorts history, LaFleur claims I have rejected his argument that Edo

Buddhism mixed well with abortion and infanticide *because* I think Buddhism should condemn these practices. My comments were really not that complex; it is simply that beyond his interpretations of silence, LaFleur offers no evidence that Buddhism ever condoned abortion and infanticide. In his response to my review, he still fails to cite a single Edo Buddhist voice in support of his view. He simply reiterates his reading of silence, and for some reason concludes that I, in noting this absence of voices, am guilty of moral prescription. Such are the ironies of critical interaction in the academy.

In my review I cited the *mabiki*-condemning *ema* as tangible descriptive evidence that Buddhism did not mix well with infanticide. I also noted the accompanying homily as literary evidence of the same. Obviously these pieces of evidence do not tell the entire story of the relationship between Buddhism and infanticide, but they are loud voices of condemnation. This, at least, is my simple, dare I say “positivist,” view. LaFleur agrees that the *ema* express condemnation, but adds a complex twist: although the priests clandestinely condoned *mabiki*, they “trotted out” the *ema* to demonstrate their public support of the official anti-*mabiki* policies. Again, I leave it to our readers to decide whether the evidence of the *ema* supports my somewhat prosaic view that certain priests of integrity publicly condemned what they privately did not tolerate, or LaFleur’s complex, admittedly more interesting, view that hypocritical priests publicly condemned what they privately tolerated. In refusing to accept the Buddhist voices of condemnation, he effectively silences them. I hold that sometimes what is obvious can also be true.

It is for similar reasons that I criticize LaFleur’s treatment of modern Japanese women and their purported use of Buddhism to deal with abortion. Where is the evidence? Whose voice is presented? In his response LaFleur does cite several contemporary women who support his view, and this is significant evidence, but these voices are missing in his book. It is true that I surgically lifted from Ochiai Seiko only her Buddhist condemnation of abortion, and I accept LaFleur’s point that she is far from categorical on this issue. LaFleur’s reproduction of the rest of the quote makes it clear that her acceptance of the necessity for taking life involves a moral struggle. The important point, however, is that the struggle arises precisely because that very acceptance conflicts with her understanding of the matter as a Buddhist. If Ochiai is willing to accept abortion, it is not because she is a Buddhist but in spite of that fact. This is an example of the tension arising from *her* understanding (not mine) that Buddhism does not mix easily with abortion. Her acceptance of abortion, if indeed she is accepting it,

does not make her a bad Buddhist, but it does put her in conflict with that part of her Buddhist conviction that I highlighted through quotectomy.

The issue I am raising is this: since most of the modern Buddhists cited by LaFleur (Fujiyoshi, Hanayama, Iizawa, etc.) question in varying degrees or even criticize abortion, *tatari*, and *mizuko kuyō*, what element of their—or anyone else's—Buddhist beliefs is capable of resolving that conflict? I think that for many Buddhists it is *mizuko kuyō*, but not for Ochiai Seiko or the other Buddhists whom he cites.

There are at least two equivocal situations at work here, one within the Buddhist world and the other outside. It is the equivocation within Buddhism that LaFleur accuses me of dissolving with an unambiguous hard line, but that equivocation exists only to the degree that a genuine debate is present between those who are critical of abortion and those who condone it. The critical side can clearly be heard, but the side of toleration is represented in *Liquid Life* mostly, if not entirely, by silence. Hence the debate—and thus the equivocation—within Buddhism is difficult to perceive; if it appears that I have dissolved that equivocation, it is because LaFleur never made it solidify in the first place, except through speculations about silence.

More easily seen in *Liquid Life* is the second type of equivocation, the one that takes place in the minds and hearts of people like Ochiai Seiko. Ochiai's inclination as a modern woman is to some extent against that of her Buddhist persona, which is, except for unheard silences, unequivocal about abortion. All I need to be satisfied with *Liquid Life* is to hear some Buddhists say clearly that, despite the first precept, Buddhism condones abortion and infanticide for certain complex reasons. Or something to that unsilent effect.

Like my citation of the *ema*, my reference to Mizoguchi Akiyo was an attempt to add at least another voice to a book that I contend is lacking in representatives speaking for themselves. LaFleur is correct in noting in his response that we now have more “statements by women on matters such as abortion.” I understand that LaFleur did not intend *Liquid Life* to be definitive, but it would seem that a study designed in good part to explore the attitudes of modern Japanese women should not leave them so silent. I cited Mizoguchi Akiyo's condemnation of *mizuko kuyō* not to suggest in some prescriptive fashion that the practice of *mizuko kuyō* is without merit, but that there are women who are critical of the view he presents in his book. I would think that the spectrum of women's views presented and discussed should include critics as well as admirers.

I hope that these added comments will assure LaFleur that my

criticisms are offered with respect and with the intention to raise important issues. Judging from the kinds of comments that both he and I have been receiving from Japanese who have read the book, I feel that *Liquid Life* is an immensely important contemporary interpretation of Buddhism that divorces abortion from sin, and, as such, provides an outlook that many Japanese are finding refreshingly new. In criticizing LaFleur for excessive speculation on the past and insufficient ethnography on the present, I do not wish to diminish his accomplishment as a philosopher who has made an original and significant contribution to our changing understanding of how Buddhism can help people deal with a very complex issue in life, an issue that, as Ochiai Seiko says, is full of wounds and woundings.