



Paul Groner, *Ryōgen and Mount Hiei: Japanese Tendai in the Tenth Century*

Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. 526 pp. Maps, tables, figures, glossary, bibliography, index. \$48.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-2260-9.

RYŌGEN 良源 IS ONE of the “three sages and two teachers” (*sanshō nishi* 三聖二師) of the Japanese Tendai tradition. Although he is the least known among modern Buddhist scholars—the other four figures are Saichō, Ennin, Enchin, and Annen—Groner points out that “of the five, Ryōgen is enshrined in more temples than any of the others” (p. 290), indicating his broad influence and popularity at a local level. I must admit that when I first picked up this book, I came to the subject thinking that Ryōgen was “merely” a practical, scheming politician who, though influential in the development of Tendai as an institution, was far from the “ideal” monk we Buddhist scholars tend to focus on as “important” figures in Buddhist history, and one who played a crucial role in the secularization/corruption of the Tendai establishment to boot. My assumption that Ryōgen would not be so interesting (or worthy of attention) revealed my bias that figures with a doctrinal influence (such as Saichō and Ennin) are more “important” or “compelling.” Groner’s study, however, impressed on me again the importance of institutional history, as well as underscoring the centrality of “practical benefits” in Japanese Buddhism, through Ryōgen’s achievements in these areas.

I also had the pleasure of visiting Mt Hiei with Paul Groner and many others in the spring of 2003 (see FIGURE 1), where I was impressed with the continuing strong presence of Ryōgen on the mountain. The many monuments in his memory, as well as the vigorous activity of the temples associated with him (such as the Daishidō 大師堂 in Yokawa; see FIGURES 2 and 3), show his continuing popularity with regard to practical benefits, such as his role in protecting against evil forces, rather than in doctrinal matters. (This, for example, is in contrast to Saichō’s transmission of T’ien-t’ai teachings,



FIGURE 1. Paul Groner in front of stone monument on Mt Hiei explaining the origin of Gansan Daishi (Ryōgen) as the “horned” demon (Tsuno Daishi).

Ennin and Enchin’s role with *mikkyō*, or Genshin’s contribution to Pure Land ideas). It is this role, as well as Ryōgen’s contributions as a practical/political organizer and promoter of the Tendai institution, that Groner reveals and discusses so well in this book.

This voluminous study presents the life and contribution of Ryōgen in roughly chronological order. The opening chapters discuss Ryōgen’s place in the Tendai school, and the early (pre-Ryōgen) history of factionalism within the Tendai school, thus providing a good summary of developments on Mt Hiei in the 150 years between Saichō (the founder) and Ryōgen. The successive chapters then follow Ryōgen’s illustrious career, from his

early years to his rise to prominence, his success in gaining patronage from the Fujiwara family, his reputation and skill in debates, his accession to head (*zasu* 座主) of the Tendai school, his role in developing the Tendai examination system (including *rōngi* 論議, or doctrinal debates), his success in gathering financial support for rebuilding or renovating old buildings and building new structures, and his struggle to consolidate control through factional appointments. This section on factional appointments contains a nuanced discussion of Ryōgen’s reputation as the person who established the use of warrior monks on Mt Hiei, implying that Ryōgen was responsible (at least in part) for the corruption of the Tendai school through the recourse to violence; however, Groner shows that the actual use of warrior monks developed after Ryōgen’s death.

The next section, chapter 12, is an anomaly in that it does not fit the general flow of the book; rather, it should be considered a bonus as Groner shares his work on the role of nuns during this period (ninth to tenth century).

The most fascinating chapter, to me, was the final (though short) “Epilogue” on Ryōgen’s “posthumous career,” in which Groner briefly discusses the development of Ryōgen’s reputation and its various manifestations, from the spread of assemblies



FIGURE 2. The entrance of Daishidō at Yokawa, Mt Hiei.



FIGURE 3. Inside Daishidō at Yokawa.

(*kō* 講) honoring Ryōgen, images of Ryōgen with mysterious powers, his reputation as “the founder of the fortunetelling systems found at Japanese temples and shrines” (298), his power as the “king of demons” (*maō* 魔王); see again FIGURE 1, which shows the monument to Ryōgen as Gansan Daishi 元三大師 and the “horned” demon (Tsuno Daishi 角大師), and his influence in the development of Tendai rituals and practices. On this last point, it is not surprising that many later *hongaku* 本覚 (“original enlightenment”) texts were attributed to Ryōgen. In addition to giving these *hongaku* texts the authority of a famous author, Groner makes the interesting observation, by connecting Ryōgen’s contributions on the development of debates on Mt Hiei and the style of *hongaku* argumentation, that “the tendency to take scriptural passages out of context and elucidate them in debates may have developed into the unregulated explanations that characterize some *hongaku* literature” (302). In any case, it is clear that Ryōgen’s reputation and continuing influence on the folk level reflects the multifaceted nature of his varied contributions.

Finally, the volume wraps up with appendices providing translations of numerous works by Ryōgen, thus providing textual substance to the explanations of Ryōgen’s life and work.

In sum, this volume is a meticulous and detailed study of a key figure in Japanese Buddhist history. Based on Groner’s work, it could be argued that Ryōgen is of more importance than figures (such as Enchin and Annen) whose influence was limited mainly to doctrinal studies, and is certainly worthy of our attention in understanding Buddhism in Japan.

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