



Helen Hardacre, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan: A Study of the Southern Kantō Region, Using Late Edo and Early Meiji Gazetteers*

Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2002. Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, no. 41. xxi + 247 pp. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN 1-929280-13-0.

IF YOU WERE to leaf through this volume at a book stall, you might be daunted by the thick description, including numerical tabulations, that appears on many of its pages. But if you seek a genuine understanding of the religious complexion of emerging modern Japan, you would be wrong to pass it over. Hardacre's latest book breaks new ground in Western scholarship because it successfully applies the methods of local history (which commands a small but vigorous following among American historians of early modern Japan) to the topic of Japanese religions. The value of this approach is that it gives us a concrete sense of the interrelated, combinative nature of religious life in Japan during the century prior to its emergence as a modern power.

Hardacre posits that we cannot comprehend the meaning of religion in a particular society unless we understand its specific institutions. Until now, whether because of the doctrinal orientation of religion scholars or simply the difficulty of unearthing factual details about past social practices, the institutional dimension of Edo religious history has been neglected in the West. A number of excellent studies of nativist, Confucian, Buddhist, and popular religious ideas and movements have appeared in the last few decades, but many have been limited by a perspective that views each of these systems as a discrete entity, community, or tradition that somehow transcends the local socio-economic conditions in which it arose. By assaying a local history of a particular area of Japan, Hardacre in contrast offers us a glimpse of what we have been missing: the reality of people's religious existence as structured by (and in turn structuring) temples, shrines, and confraternities.

The book commences with an introduction to the main sources used for the study, which the author characterizes as "gazetteers" (*fudoki*). In addition to information about village populations and the like, the shogunal gazetteers of the late Edo provide descriptions of all the Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, hermitages, and chapels in a given location. By studying these records we can gain a reasonable idea not only of the number of such institutions in the particular area we wish to research, but also of their exact locations, physical dimensions, associated ritual practices, historical lore, and relations with other religious bodies. Hardacre's chief early Meiji source, the so-called "Imperial Gazetteer" (*Kōkoku chishi*), on the other hand, is more fragmentary and less rich in detail about religious life in the southern Kantō area, even though it purportedly covers a wider range of information about villages and counties in general. The author accordingly uses the Meiji gazetteer

material chiefly for comparative purposes with regard to her earlier sources, and supplements the information in them by drawing on the prefectural statistical surveys that began to appear in the 1880s. By using the Edo-era gazetteers in conjunction with Meiji sources, one evidently stands a good chance of grasping at least the changes in Buddhist and Shinto personnel and property holdings that took place in this part of Japan during the transition to the modern period.

Chapter 2 reviews the legal parameters that shaped Edo-era religious institutions, including the shogunate's establishment of liaison temples within Buddhist sects (*furegashira*), the head-branch (*honmatsu*) system of Buddhist temple organization, Buddhist priests' role in maintaining population registers and providing for parishioners' ritual needs, and the shogunal authorization of the Yoshida and Shirakawa houses' control of Shinto shrines. Here we learn a few facts that are not always included in the conventional summary of these well-known features of the Tokugawa religious establishment; for example, Hardacre explains how the Ji and the Shugen sects depended less on income from parishioners' fees and funerary services than on the distribution of devotional items and the commodification of prayer services. Before introducing the results of her scholarship at its most specific level, in Chapter 3 Hardacre also provides a general characterization of Edo-era religious institutions in the specific areas of her survey, namely Western Tama and Kōza counties. Here she uses the data contained in the Tokugawa gazetteers to indicate the relationship between these institutions and the population, as well as their relations to each other.

On the basis of this information, the author proceeds to offer a number of hypotheses. For example, after correlating population numbers with numbers of temples and shrines in each area, Hardacre estimates the average number of supporting households per institution and argues, based on consideration of parish temple economy, that many Buddhist temples of the late Edo period were poor. She also calculates the distribution of Buddhist temples across the population by sect and the percentage of local shrines that were administered by Buddhist temples. She concludes that Western Tama and Kōza displayed distinctive differences in their sectarian composition, though Shingon and Zen sects were strongest in both areas. Moreover, it is clear from this localized study that in comparison with Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines were highly variegated in their objects of worship and their administrative arrangements, and that shrine priests were relatively few in number. Hardacre's most important insight, however, is that the strength of a Buddhist sect in any given location, particularly its popular religious influence, must be understood not only in terms of the number of its own temples, but also in terms of the numbers of shrines that its priests administered.

As the Edo period came to a close, temples needed to create additional income to compensate for the disappearance of earlier forms of revenue, and as the author emphasizes, in this regard income from shrines took on even greater importance. Later in the book (Chapter 6) Hardacre reveals that the loss of shrines in the southern Kantō region had the greatest impact on the Shingon and Zen sects because these were the denominations that had administered the greatest number of shrines prior

to the Restoration. She concludes that many Buddhist temples were closed in the early Meiji not because of any violent backlash against Buddhism inspired by the new government's pro-Shinto policies, but because the temples lacked economic resources. The author further suggests that the temples that survived were often those that had possessed considerable land prior to the Restoration. Although these richer temples lost their shogunal land-grants in 1871, they nevertheless managed to parlay their former property-owning status into enough revenue to survive through the early Meiji. Moreover, based on the numbers she adduces from the gazetteers, it appears that in Western Tama and Kōza the average number of households per Buddhist temple increased after the Restoration. Thus, even though Buddhism in general experienced a drop in prestige and wealth during these years, the closure of impoverished temples seems to have contributed to the viability of the remaining institutions.

Hardacre also demonstrates that the poverty of Buddhist temples and the lack of Buddhist priests to perform funerals for parishioners (not simply the putative pressure to conform to nativist ideology) sometimes led whole villages to petition for conversion to Shinto in the early Meiji. Furthermore, after the Restoration the very Buddhist priests who had formerly administered local Shinto shrines in a number of cases remained the only plausible candidates for running the newly independent shrines. Many members of the Buddhist clergy in fact requested a "change of vestments"—they abandoned their Buddhist identities and became Shinto priests. Ironically, the Shinto shrines of the early Meiji, often rededicated to deities of national or imperial significance, were staffed in several cases by these former Buddhist priests. Hardacre suggests that this phenomenon may have provided a modicum of continuity for these institutions and their constituents during the dramatic transition period. From this perspective, institutional Buddhism was not necessarily weakened by the Meiji conversions to Shinto; the new Shinto institutions were not developed enough to accommodate people's ritual needs on a large scale, and in any case most people retained their affiliation to Buddhist temples, which continued to administer their ancestors' graves.

The peculiar structure of this book is designed to accommodate its aim of identifying changes that took place in connection with the Meiji Restoration and its immediate aftermath. The author takes up an object of study first in the late Edo context, then in the early Meiji, using the relevant gazetteer data in each case as a basis for her assessment of possible changes in the religious life of the area under study. The reader is thus invited in Chapter 4 to consider four religious institutions as they existed in the late Edo period, and in Chapter 7 the condition of the same institutions in the early Meiji. One important point that emerges from this diachronic comparison of the four sites (Mitakesan, Takaosan, the Samukawa Shrine, and Enoshima) is that the various ritual experts involved in each one interacted and sometimes conflicted with each other. The institutions that proved most successful in navigating the difficult economic conditions of the mid-nineteenth century, Hardacre suggests, were those whose revenue was not negatively affected by internal competition among the Buddhist priests, shrine priests, and pilgrimage guides associated with each site.

The most important general point that we can glean from Hardacre's detailed examination of these four sites before and after the Restoration is that the government's division of Buddhism and Shinto (*shinbutsu bunri*) was not necessarily a traumatic event for religious institutions in Japan. At least in the southern Kantō, the policy required simply a reorientation to the new politico-religious reality, which each institution demonstrated through a series of specific adaptations in its operation and style. In fact, all four institutions benefited from the Meiji elimination of restrictions on travel; periodic exhibitions of religious treasures (*kaichō*) and festivals contributed to the popularization of these sites and indeed to the development of tourism in Japan.

Hardacre warns at the outset of her study that given the present state of research, we cannot gain a comprehensive understanding of ordinary religious life in these areas. Indeed, in her chapters on "folk" and popular religious life she confines herself mostly to highlighting the salient features of common practices in the regions of her study. Lay practices associated with Shingon included pilgrimages to Mt. Kōya; itinerant priests (*kōya hijiri*) organized the excursions, distributed talismans, and collected funds. Hardacre emphasizes that these figures were treated equally by village residents and headmen, regardless of sectarian affiliation, and concludes that the practice illustrates the "religious authority" of Shingon Buddhism in the area (134). Local economic and political factors may also have been at work, however. In some parts of Japan village headmen exacted payments from mendicant priests in return for hosting them and instructing villagers to donate, without regard for affiliation. Other popular practices that Hardacre mentions are pilgrimages to other sites (especially Ise and Ōyama); confraternity activities associated with a wide range of deities; travel literature; shrine festivals; and symbolic miniature pilgrimages. The common theme running throughout this discussion is the recognition that people tended to be affiliated with different groups less as a matter of belief than because of their membership in a particular village, sex, or age group.

Hardacre's survey of Edo-era popular religious life necessarily has a fragmentary character, but Chapter 8, which takes up the subject in the Meiji context, greatly compensates. Here the author introduces a topic that is virtually untreated in English-language scholarship, namely the development of religious practices associated with silkworm cultivation in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the southern Kantō area new shrines were devoted to sericulture deities, while existing religious institutions rededicated their rituals and associated paraphernalia to the success of the silk industry. As Hardacre observes, the emergence of these practices in the Meiji palpably demonstrate the adaptability of religious institutions and people to socioeconomic change.

Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan focuses on the social data of religion as a whole within a limited geographical area, rather than on the history of a single sect or on the lives and ideas of individual religious practitioners. At times one wishes the author would indulge a bit more in introducing even the "tiny number of documents" that speak to the question of what the people of Kōza and Western Tama actually thought and felt about their religious institutions and practices.

Yet in the final analysis the book does not need such testimonies to give us a concrete understanding of how ordinary people managed to be simultaneously “both Shinto and Buddhist”—a common rendition of the modern Japanese mentality that is rarely substantiated in historical research.

Hardacre’s concern to develop a usable model for researching the local history of religion in Japan is also noteworthy. Her Methodological Appendix is a detailed account of the methods she used to compile and calculate the data upon which her analysis is founded. Throughout the book she evinces a healthy skepticism regarding the limitations of her sources and the need to supplement them whenever possible with information from sectarian, literary, or other materials—her conclusions are persuasive in part because of this skepticism. Moreover, the various tables, lists, and numbers contained in the book are presented to the reader in a relatively simple, understandable form. Scholars will come away from reading the volume, not only with specific insights like those mentioned above, but also with the conviction that close work in local Japanese archives, if pursued systematically and carefully, can genuinely transform our understanding of the religious landscape of Japan.

The great number of compilations and studies produced by Japanese local historians during the last few decades has invigorated Western renditions of early modern Japanese history, affecting our long-held assumptions about the notion of “Japan” as an organizing concept for our studies. *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan* lacks an extended consideration of the implications of local history for our understanding of the religions of Japan “as a whole,” but it lays the foundation for a fruitful debate. To my mind, the significance of the local history of religion is precisely its clarification of larger patterns—in this case, the interrelatedness of Buddhist and Shinto institutions in emerging modern Japan.

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