



Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen, ed., *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*

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WHILE focusing on Japan, this collection of fifteen essays investigates one of the central issues for the study of esoteric and tantric Buddhism more generally—the meaning of secrecy (*mitsu* 密; or *himitsu* 秘密) as that concept is understood and as

it functions within the tradition. At the same time this is an issue relevant to a much wider set of inquiries in religious studies generally.

When, as is noted here by Teeuwen (p. 172), manuals for the performance of esoteric rituals are available on the shelves of libraries—and of bookstores—the significance of the concept of secrecy takes on a different nuance from that common in Western religious culture. For the latter, the understanding of occult or esoteric is commonly taken to mean a salvific teaching or practice that is only accessible to initiates, that is, it is to be kept hidden or concealed from non-initiates.

Following an introductory essay by Teeuwen in which he provides the reader with an overview of the subject and an introduction to the contents of the collection, there are three articles that provide important context for the balance of the collection. The first is Albert de Jong's "Secrets and secrecy in the study of religion: Comparative views from the Ancient World" which gives us an introduction to the topic as broadly conceived in religious studies and exemplifies by drawing examples from the ancient west, mystery cults such as those of Pythagoras or of Hermes Trismegistus. In the context of the ancient world, de Jong usefully distinguishes between secret knowledge, secret rituals, and secret identities.

The second article in this section is "The problem of secrecy in Indian Tantric Buddhism" by Ronald M. Davidson. Davidson begins with a critique of some of the conceptions of secrecy that have been attributed to Buddhism, specifically Edward Conze's characterization of the issue. (It is worth noting in this regard that Conze's own ideas of secrecy seem to have been formed by his involvement with Western occultist traditions. Significantly, in his autobiographical writings he referred to himself as a "gnostic.") Davidson then goes on to examine the rhetoric and practice of secrecy as found in several texts, including the categorization of secrets into "naturally secret, hidden and obscure" that is found in the *Guhyagarbha*. Important for the understanding of secrecy in tantric Buddhism is Davidson's (convincing) conclusion that it is a "self-perpetuating strategy that ensured its continued independent maturation" (p. 74).

"Myth and secrecy in Tang-period Tantric Buddhism" by Martin Lehnert is the third of the contextualizing articles. Lehnert attempts to move the discussion forward "from the problems of tenet classification, lineages of esoterism and sectarian history." What is then revealed is "that secrecy took on a ubiquitous yet multifarious status as an organizing policy" (p. 79). He then explores these various thematics, including technical and moral qualifications of the practitioner, religious authority through transparency and concealment, and the limitations of linguistic communication in esoteric ritual.

The second section, "Japan's medieval culture of secrecy," comprises eight essays. Fabio Rambelli examines the role of secrecy from the perspective of "the esoteric episteme and esoteric rituals" (p. 107), as well as discussing the training process that Shingon initiates underwent. Central to this is an understanding of the different hermeneutic levels employed within the tradition as ways to generate and systematize meanings—from explicit, denotative meanings to those that are most secret. Also of

importance is Rambelli's extension of the system of stages of initiation (*kanjō* 灌頂) to the rituals of transmission for training in the use of siddham script (*shittan* 悉曇).

The next essay in this section is Lucia Dolce's "Reconsidering the taxonomy of the esoteric: Hermeneutical and ritual practices of the Lotus sutra." While it is common to think of the Tendai tradition as setting Lotus sutra and esoteric practices in paired opposition, Dolce's essay explores the esotericization of the *Lotus Sutra*. She begins with the uses of the concept of secret in non-esoteric/non-tantric Tiantai in China. The development of a Japanese esotericized practice involved the "assimilation of lexicon, images and concepts derived from the Lotus sutra [which] thus had crucial consequences for the reformulation of the esoteric carried out in Taimitsu" (p. 148). In particular Dolce explores the development of the Lotus *maṇḍala*, and its use as the third of a threefold *maṇḍala* system—the other two being the familiar Taizōkai and Kongōkai *maṇḍalas*.

The function of secrecy is examined by Mark Teeuwen in his "Knowing vs. owning a secret: Secrecy in medieval Japan, as seen through the *sokui kanjō* enthronement unctio[n]." Not only does Teeuwen make a convincing argument regarding the distinction between knowing and owning a secret as central to understanding the functioning of secrecy in medieval Japan, but he also examines the ways in which authority and power were tied to ownership, that is, to proper initiation into the secret, and not to knowing the secret's existence or even the secret itself. Given the consequences of ownership, however, claims to proper initiations and the construction of authoritative transmissions became an important means of claiming or reclaiming position. At times this involved the creation of new rituals, as well as the location of previously hidden or unknown texts. Central to Teeuwen's study is the manipulation of transmission and authority in retired emperor Go-Uda's efforts to make Tōji once again primary in the governance of Shingon.

Nobumi Iyanaga's "Secrecy, sex and apochrypha: Remarks on some paradoxical phenomena" examines the little known, but oft maligned Tachikawa lineage. In this he determines that the Tachikawa is not the heretical sect usually portrayed—source, for example, of the infamous "skull ritual." He also introduces the important concept of "cross-transmission" to describe the complexity of initiatory relations in medieval Buddhism. In addition Iyanaga's essay suggests a couple of issues in the comparative study of tantric Buddhism. The first is in connection with the "recovery" of buried texts on Kōyasan (p. 217), which is directly comparable to the Tibetan terma tradition. The second is his suggestion that the *mikkyō*-ization of medieval Japanese culture generally is a consequence of the maturation of esoteric Buddhism. That this is indeed the case is supported by Robert I. LEVY's work on tantric traditions of Bhaktapur, Nepal, where the same kind of esotericization of craft professions occurs (1990, 315).

The esoteric character of medieval Japanese artistic institutions is examined by Susan Blakely Klein in her "Esotericism in Noh commentaries and plays: Konparu Zenchiku's *Meishuku shū* and *Kakitsubata*." In her conclusion she points to one of the problems of present-day scholarship on these kinds of topics—the fact that we find

so many of the associations that were significant for those we study to be implicitly implausible. As she points out, however, this is the crux of the study of the medieval Japanese episteme—“the linguistic/symbolic relation of signifier and signified is not arbitrary, as we believe today, but motivated (ultimately non-dual)” (p. 229). The very fecundity of esoteric interpretation is based on this principal, and Klein explores esoteric allegoresis in both the secret treatises of Noh, and in the Noh play *Kakitsubata*. The methodological issue that Klein has so clearly articulated suggests that future studies of esoteric hermeneutics in Asia may benefit from the extensive scholarship on study of esotericism in the West, which employs the same kind of semiotic logic of association.

Almost everyone seems to know Gaṇeśa, the cute, lovable, pudgy elephant-headed deity of contemporary popular Hinduism. Bernard Faure’s contribution to this collection “The elephant in the room: The cult of secrecy in Japanese Tantrism,” however, examines the more complicated aspects of Gaṇeśa, also known as Vināyaka, one of the “hidden buddhas.” Even when brought into the Buddhist fold, Vināyaka “remains a dark, cruel god, invoked in black magical rites” (p. 257). In the Japanese tantric context Vināyaka, known as Shōten 聖天 or as Kangiten 歡喜天, retains his association with wilderness, as well as his more familiar role as “remover of obstacles.” Most interestingly, Faure argues for understanding Shōten’s sexual associations, including his function as a placenta deity (*ena kōjin*).

Moving from the secrets imported from India by Buddhists, Kadoya Atsushi’s “Myths, rites, and icons: Three views of a secret” discusses the “Ten Sacred Treasures” deriving from the well-known “Three Sacred Regalia.” The Ten Sacred Treasures were employed as a complex semiotic establishing the legitimacy and authority of Shintō, the understanding of which is only possible by “a close examination of the intersection of myth, rite, and icon in the medieval religious imagination” (p. 280). Kadoya also examines how the significance of the Ten Sacred Treasures ceased to be of significance, beginning with the work of Yoshida Kanemoto, founder of Yuiitsu Shintō.

Yoshida Kanemoto is even more central to Bernhard Scheid’s examination of secrecy in relation to the care and maintenance of the text (*textpflege*) of the *Nihon shoki*—“the manner in which it was kept alive and meaningful in spite of changing cultural and linguistic conditions” (p. 284). In his “Two modes of secrecy in the *Nihon shoki* transmission” Scheid explicates the history of the strategies by which the *Nihon shoki* was interpreted so as to preserve its vitality as a religio-cultural object. This process of interpretation is distinct from our own contemporary socio-historical and philological approaches, which seek to delimit and specify the meaning of the text. Rather, the two modes of secrecy of the title of Scheid’s essay were employed, one in opposition to the other. “In the first case, something real is kept secret because it is for some reason not advisable to reveal it to everybody. In the second case, the ultimate truth is secret by definition, and can only be revealed by the employment of rituals that may or may not be protected by secrecy rules” (p. 301).

In the third section of this collection, “The demise of secrecy,” the essays move toward an examination of the ways in which the culture of secrecy and esoteric

hermeneutics lost currency in the premodern period. This section comprises three essays, the first of which is William M. Bodiford's "When secrecy ends: The Tokugawa reformation of Tendai Buddhism and its implications." In the changing religious, intellectual, and political culture of the Tokugawa, secrecy itself became an object of suspicion and criticism, rather than authority and legitimacy. Bodiford specifically examines the critiques of Reikū Kōken, part of a move that emphasized *vinaya* and employed the standard of Chinese Tiantai to reform Tendai, and protect it from any future "repression and destruction by the warrior government" (p. 316). With the success of these reforms, "For the first time publicly available texts (published scriptures and Chinese commentaries) became more powerful than private and secret sectarian lore" (p. 325). Bodiford successfully demonstrates that the ways in which texts were understood to be significant changed as a result of dynamics internal to Japan, providing a more nuanced intellectual history.

At the same time that secret transmissions and rituals within Buddhism were being critiqued, the Shogunate itself was employing strategies of secrecy for its own purposes. In her "Hiding the shoguns: Secrecy and the nature of political authority in Tokugawa Japan," Anne Walthall examines how the Tokugawa shoguns employed "strategies of concealment and secrecy to enhance their authority and to maintain the status hierarchy that underpinned the social order" (p. 331). One of the significant forms that this strategy took was concealment of the body of the shogun. Perhaps the most important concealed body is the corpse of Ieyasu. Memorial rituals that served to reassert the importance of the familial relations of current shoguns with Ieyasu, and eventually "transformed Tokugawa military leaders into magical symbols of sacred authority" (p. 334). Walthall goes on to examine the strategies of concealment and secrecy in a variety of settings. Including, for example, how the architectural forms at Chiyoda castle structured reception of daimyo by the shogun, in the investiture ceremonies of a new shogun, the reception of foreign envoys, and so on. She suggests that the invisible presence of the shogun, as at Noh performances, acted much as the revelation of otherwise secreted Buddhist images in *kaichō* rituals. Walthall makes the complex relations between secrecy and power evident here in the political realm, as we have already seen in the religious and aesthetic realms.

Kate Wildman Nakai's "'Esoteric' and 'public' in late Mito thought" looks at the role of Confucian thought in interaction with Shintō in creating an cultural environment in which the open and public took precedence over the secret and private. This was not, however, a simple and straightforward process, as it was based on an already esotericized Shintō striving, at least in the hands of Hayashi Razan, to identify "true" Shintō with the way of the Confucian ideal emperor. Razan's ideas, together with those of his younger contemporary, the Confucian Yamazaki Ansai, form the heritage for the Mito school, late developments with which are the focus of Nakai's study. While committed to the Shogunate's authority, Mito thinkers working with Confucian concepts emphasized the relation between Amaterasu and the emperor—thus, unwittingly creating additional strains on the political system, ones that led eventually to "the disintegration of the ideological foundations of the Tokugawa

feudal system” (p. 375). In addition to this ironic outcome, the Mito emphasis on public ritual served to finalize the shift away from medieval conceptions of the power of secrecy into the modern suspicion of secrecy, and valorization of the public.

It is rare to find a collection of essays in which all of the individual contributions are themselves important works. This is one such case, making the whole worthy of reading and rereading. It fits together well, is well-balanced and provides insight into an aspect of Japanese religious culture that is key to our understanding. The editors, as well as the individual contributors are to be congratulated on the production of such a fine collection. At the same time, this work serves as a valuable complement to TEEUWEN and RAMBELLI 2003, which contains articles by many of the same authors.

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Richard K. Payne

Institute of Buddhist Studies, at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley