



François Lachaud, *Le vieil homme qui vendait du thé: Excentricité et retrait du monde dans le Japon du XVIIIe siècle* (Les conférences de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études 4)

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THIS monograph is based on lectures given in the context of Jean-Noël Robert's chair of Japanese Buddhism at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. It focuses on

the figure of Baisaō 賣茶翁 (Kō Yūgai 高遊外, 1675–1763), a widely admired “eccentric” (*kijin*), whose career has been presented in English by Norman WADDELL (1984, 2008). Such marginal figures acquired literary and spiritual prestige in the conformist society of the Edo period. Since Baisaō was not a prominent intellectual, writer, or religious leader, he is likely not to be on the radar screen of Western scholars of Japanese philosophy and religion, who may consign him to the vague realm of aesthetics.

To illuminate his philosophical and religious significance, Lachaud refers to a line of literary hermits stretching from Kamo no Chōmei (1155–1216) to Nagai Kafū (1879–1959), as well as to Chinese poets and artists of the Song period and earlier, who provided a model for combining eremiticism with the conviviality of a literary coterie. Sinophilia prevailed among Edo practitioners of Chinese verse (*kanshi*), calligraphy, *go*, playing the *kin*, and painting (32). Neo-Confucianism had more appeal than Buddhism. Baisaō was an adherent of Obaku Zen, which communicated a fresh view of a living Chinese culture to the Japanese. Lachaud does not refer to the Rinzai Zen poet and eccentric Ikkyū Sojun, perhaps because Baisaō is remote from the tradition of libertine monks. Rather he stands for a rough-hewn, natural lifestyle, emblemized in his championing of *sencha* 煎茶 in opposition to the refinements of the tea ceremony.

Lachaud also refers, perhaps over-generously, to Western figures such as Cicero, John of the Cross, Izaak Walton, La Rochefoucauld, Nerval, Champfleury, Cézanne, Heidegger, Kerouac, and Ginsberg, in order to show that the contemplative freedom of Japanese eccentrics has universal value. He reports that the spirit of the eccentrics is alive in Japan today: “The terms ‘slow life,’ ‘healing,’ and *iyashi*—the autochthonous translation of the preceding term—and on everyone’s lips and in the front window of bookshops and shops for incense, aromatherapy, and New Age accessories” (18–19). These references seem to me to dilute the specific character of Baisaō and his Edo context. But Lachaud has succeeded in showing that Baisaō stands for more than a period charm and quaintness, and that he can profitably be interrogated in connection with central themes of religious thought.

One of Baisaō’s foremost admirers was Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), who also claimed *kijin* status and took up Baisaō’s critique of the formalism of the tea ceremony and his championing of the freedom and naturalness of *sencha*. He remarked that Baisaō hid himself behind his role of tea seller to laugh at the world, from the perspective of enlightenment (109–10). He presents Baisaō in fictional guise as one alien to the tortuous ideas of Buddhist and Confucian scholasticism: “Here, my heart is purified of its own accord at the stone mouth of my hermitage spring, and thinking neither of life nor of death, I know neither cold nor heat” (112). Another interesting connection is with the painter Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), famed for his “vegetable nirvana” scenes. This way of living Buddhism as a comedy, yet without irreverence, is something for which few Western or Christian parallels can be found.

Some errata: on page 34 read Karaki Junzō, not Jūzō; a word is missing on page 84, 1.7; the reference on page 80 to *Kinsei kijin den*, II, pages 78–80, should be to I,

pages 96–8. The pages in Chinese reproduced on pages 92 and 95 do not connect very smoothly with the passages translated.

REFERENCES

WADDELL, Norman

- 1984 The old tea seller: The life and poetry of Baisaō. *The Eastern Buddhist* 17: 93–123.
- 2008 *Baisao, the Old Tea Seller: Life and Zen Poetry in 18th Century Kyoto*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.

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