



Michihiro Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941*

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IT IS WELL KNOWN that the movement of Shin Buddhism which accompanied Japanese immigrants to the United States constituted the largest importation of any Asian religion to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Less recognized, however, has been the internal complexity of that history. Ama's pathbreaking depiction enhances our understanding with a heightened level of sophistication.

The heart of the book is an extensively researched descriptive history of the politics of twentieth century Honganji life as it moved into Hawaii and the continental United States. A considerable amount of the story has been told before in piecemeal form, but Ama presents a more integrated synthesis than any previous account, utilizing not only all the previous secondary literature but also unpublished materials in research collections, newspapers, interviews, and many documents generated by Shin Buddhist organizations. At the highest level of generalization, it is a narrative about the interaction of two expansionist, modern imperialist nations at contested cultural interfaces. At the many lower, local levels, where Ama's descriptions excel, it presents a multiplicity of narratives about power struggles of all kinds, in part between Japanese and white Americans, but to an equally significant extent among all the various factions and interest groups of the Japanese themselves.

The short but highly useful introductory first chapter (especially 22–30) treats the rapid changes undergone by the Shin Buddhist organizations in the Meiji period. Such conditions of instability and pressure to adapt at home were the background against which at the same time religious transfer to America was taking place. Some of the information about Honganji's conflicted relations with the new government and its internal religious reform struggles has not been introduced in English before.

After missionizing to America began in 1889 in Hawaii, the Shin leadership could reimplement some of the patterns and practices characteristic of their established communities in Japan (for example, their organizational style), but also had to freshly reinvent some aspects of their tradition. Buddhist associations related to the Nishi Honganji were formed separately in Hawaii (Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii) and the mainland (the Buddhist Mission of North America). Both needed to start their difficult work by dealing in an unprecedented manner with preexisting Japanese immigrants (sometimes entirely unchurched) and with the representation of Buddhism to Euro-Americans in English. The Honganji headquarters in Kyoto took a degree of interest in the projects, but in seeing them as extensions of its authority also interfered with them. In Hawaii, the minister Emyō Imamura, the most prominent such figure of his time, provided effective leadership between 1900 and his death in 1932, but on the mainland the founding of local Shin Buddhist groups was marked by dispersal, rivalry, and infighting, even involving churches pitted against Japanese language schools. The position of the ministers in the new American context was much weaker than in Japan, but models for their work gradually developed, along with a class of second-generation immigrant (*nisei*) ministers and a number of Euro-American convert ministers whose ideas and commitments were often ambiguous or at odds with the direction of the Japanese. In ritual practice and architectural styles, the Buddhist churches innovated early, usually incorporating more or less superficial influences from Christianity (among these prominently hymnlike songs referred to as *gathas*). In addition, English-language ordinations were invented and a number of architectural experiments undertaken.

On the doctrinal front, Ama particularly notes three men who attempted what he calls “reconstructions.” Takaichi Takahashi was a forerunner, albeit flawed, of comparative studies of Western thought, Christianity, and Shin. Itsuzō Kyōgoku was a somewhat unorthodox minister who attempted to reinterpret Shin teaching in California under the influence of the famous Higashi Honganji leader Kiyozawa Manshi. Imamura, working in the highly politicized environment of Hawaii, persistently emphasized connections between Shin culture and American democracy and pluralism. The range of influence of these innovators remained restricted, however. One unique chapter is devoted to the little-known history of the smaller mission sponsored by the Higashi Honganji in America, which was racked in its own ways with rivalries, legal conflicts, and personality differences.

On the larger scene outside of their church communities *per se*, prewar Shin ministers in America became involved in various activities both translocal and local. At the translocal level, they held a 1915 International Buddhist Congress and participated in a peace movement in Japan and the 1933 World Fellowship of Faiths. At the local level in Hawaii, some engagement with labor organizations took place. In a few valuable additional pages Ama sketches Honganji’s global prewar expansion projects, primarily in East Asia but also in South America and Europe, which reflected the broad common ideology of prewar Japanese imperialism which nearly all the Japanese-born Shin leadership shared. Otherwise in the Shin world, a politically critical spirit emerged a few times but remained extremely marginalized.

In his conclusion the author clarifies that in the sociopolitical dynamism of the postwar period, a great deal about the earlier circumstances of Shin Buddhism has changed. This is so true that he can even suggest in the current American context that Shin might become a resource for resistance to hegemonic global capitalism and even for the transcendence of nationalism.

A couple of recurrent themes are especially interesting. Since medieval times, the Shin tradition had maintained a long-standing political tradition called *shinzoku nitai* (“two truths”) in which *ōbō* (the law of the realm) and *buppō* (the *buddhadharma*, especially within the individual) were partitioned into two separable but necessary forms of allegiance. While it was an effective adaptation to the premodern period, under modern governing regimes in both Japan and the United States, with practices such as the military draft, this idea led to moral inconsistencies. When reproduced among Japanese-Americans the result could even be severe identity crises, particularly in the second generation. As a second such theme, in the area of its religious doctrine, in America the Shin version of Buddhist teaching constantly came into direct encounter with the more widely disseminated, rationalized versions of “basic” (Shakyamuni) Buddhism favored by Euro-Americans. This resulted over time in what seems to be a rather garbled rhetoric and message within the church traditions, which was not overcome.

The book is not strong in all dimensions. Despite the title, and the use of the concepts in an effective pragmatic manner, there is little in-depth exploration of

the concepts of acculturation, modernization, or globalization. The handling of Shin doctrine is for the most part conventional and relies, for good or bad, on the established English literature. The study avoids any particularly sophisticated new treatment of the longstanding linguistic and translation problems between Japanese and English which bedeviled the missionaries from the beginning, or exploration of the more subterranean psychological and philosophical structures of the Buddhist-Christian frictions. Some readers new to Shin studies may feel an explanatory gap between what looks like a “simple” pre-Meiji background and the phenomenal convolutions of the encounter with the Meiji period, which may seem to come out of nowhere. (Actually, the convolutions did not actually come out of nowhere, they came out of the already-complex Tokugawa period.) The author’s field of view is wider than any previous researcher’s because of his superior elucidation of the Japanese background to Shin Buddhism in the United States during the period; yet at the same time, it is hard for him to entirely escape the atmosphere of American ethnic studies which inescapably pervades the subject. The work will not lead to any paradigmatic reevaluations of what Shin Buddhism is about, either in Japan or the United States.

In general, however, the author succeeds brilliantly in his stated principal goal, which is to interpret Shin Buddhism in America as an active, entirely modern cultural hybridization in which the Japanese side was scarcely either passive or uniform, but rather a vigorously active and diversified agent in the process. Like the Shin tradition which was evolving contemporaneously in Japan itself, prewar American Shin reflected a wholly realistic existential situation: a historical era of mingled anxiety and hope, opportunism and idealism, ethnocentrism and globalism, and identity politics and assimilationism.

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