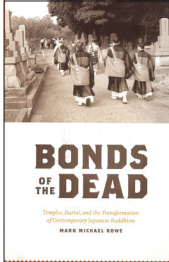


REVIEWS



Mark Michael Rowe, *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*

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BUDDHIST TEMPLES in contemporary Japan have a complex relationship with their own funerary traditions. Temples have relied on funerary income since the Tokugawa period, and land reforms in postwar Japan amplified their dependence on this income. Yet this same dependence has led to public cynicism about funerary excess and scholarly critiques about Buddhist decline. These critiques use the *mappō* 末法 doctrine, which predicts the gradual extinction of the Buddha's teaching, as a lens through which to interpret the decline in Buddhist power and influence in contemporary Japanese society. Many in academia and among the general public have viewed Japan's thriving Buddhist funeral industry, and the often high costs of funeral rites, as evidence of attempts by Buddhism to hold tightly to its remaining power. In *Bonds of the Dead*, Mark Michael Rowe examines the religious, political, social, and economic forces that created Japanese Buddhist funerary practices as they exist today, and the emergent attitudes and strategies that point to the future of these practices.

The book opens with a personal narrative of Rowe's visit to his wife's family grave in rural Tokushima and his observance of the multitude of abandoned graves surrounding them. His reflections on the sights, sounds, and rituals he experiences at the grave set the tone for the book, reflecting many of the themes he plans to cover and demonstrating to the reader that he is most interested in studying lived Buddhism. He explains his choice to focus on graves and funerals by arguing that graves are at once reflective of the status quo and, with the recent experimental innovations in funerary traditions, sites for people to challenge social norms around death (20–21).

The first chapter provides historical context covering major developments such as the Tokugawa *danka seido* 檀家制度 system and the Meiji codification of the *ie* 家, illustrating the impact these developments had on mortuary customs. For example, although the *ie* system was legally disbanded in 1947, the current civil code deems

the inheritor of “religious assets” (family altars, graves, and so forth) is to be determined by “custom,” which Rowe points out can only be referring to the “custom” of the *ie* system (25). Thus despite linguistic distancing from the *ie* in the civil code, these traditions still play a very large role in contemporary funerary practice.

Chapter 1 skips over the Taisho and prewar Showa periods completely, with the exception of an intriguing anecdote from Hosono Ungai’s 1932 book *Fumetsu no funbo* 不滅の墳墓 (*The eternal tomb*), leaving a gap in Rowe’s historical narrative. Nevertheless, this chapter’s main contribution is in the author’s discussion of the role of postwar land reforms. These reforms forced temples to give up the vast majority of land that they had previously relied on for farming income. Rowe argues the “most significant result of these reforms was increased dependence by temples on revenue from graves, funerals, and memorial rites” (29). According to Rowe this dependence also led to the increased commodification of funerary rites which, when paired with shifting demographics and growing criticism from sectarian scholars, sparked debates of not only funerary excess but also the need for Buddhist funerals at all.

These debates manifest frequently in Rowe’s ethnographic research, which he frames around the concept of *muen* 無縁, translated as “to be without bonds.” *Muen* is the subject of his second chapter and a major theme throughout the book. Traditional Japanese notions of *en* 縁 refer to a variety of bonds one shares while alive: regional (as in the *furusato* 故郷), family, and marital. As in the case of the widow whose deceased husband’s family refuses to allow her to be buried in her husband’s family grave, many examples throughout the book distinguish marital bonds from biological family bonds, highlighting that death more readily severs marital family ties. Rowe emphasizes that the absence of these bonds (*muen*) and questions about who will care for one’s grave are the source of much anxiety surrounding the after-life, and are a driving force behind new trends in Japan’s funeral industry. Even many who do have descendants or spouses expected to care for their graves still worry about the financial and social burdens that traditional funerary practices place on their loved ones. Nevertheless the majority of Buddhist temples continue to rely on the traditional *danka* system to address concerns over the absence of bonds (*muen*). Yet Rowe posits it is the emergence of a new type of the eternal memorial grave (or *kuonbo* 久遠墓) that may point to what he calls post-*danka* Buddhism (58).

In an “innovative reworking of traditional notions of community” the new types of bonds encouraged by the eternal memorial graves are based on choice rather than tradition, allowing for greater flexibility and individual freedom (58). In chapters 3 and 4, Rowe provides a useful overview of the variety of types and prices of eternal graves before introducing two in-depth case studies of eternal memorial gravesites—the Annon (安穩, tranquility) gravesite at a rural Nichiren temple, Myōkōji 妙光寺 in Niigata Prefecture, and the En no Kai (縁の会, Society of Bonds) at an urban Sōtō temple, Tōchōji 東長寺, in Tokyo. Rowe consciously selects different aspects of these gravesites in order to cover a broad range of issues (225–26). For instance, the chapter on Myōkōji emphasizes the distinctive views of Annon’s char-

ismatic founder, Ogawa Eiji 小川英爾, and the personal accounts of Annon members, to illustrate the issues of lack of grave space, changing social structures, and the role of gender in burial practices (70).

In the Tōchōji chapter, Rowe studies the role of the En no Kai's corporate partner, Annex, which handles the business side of the eternal memorial graves, and the impact this commercialization has had on funerary ritual and proselytization. Rowe's extensive ethnographic work in these chapters reveals a complicated landscape at both the individual and organizational level, leading to an expanded awareness of the diverse reasons individuals choose eternal memorial graves as well as the decisions made by temple leadership that help to shape the new grave system. This work shifts the discussion beyond mere demographics and leads to a deeper understanding of the inner workings of this significant emerging trend.

Rowe writes in response to the question of Buddhist decline, "The question, then, is not 'Is there such a thing as Buddhism in Japan?' but rather, 'Why are we not including all of these different things that happen at temples, graves, and sectarian research centers as legitimate elements of that larger thing it still seems to make sense to call 'Japanese Buddhism?'" (10). In a moment of scholarly candor, Rowe discusses flaws in his earlier approaches to ethnographic work:

Much of the framework for my investigation was on trying to determine precisely how Buddhist these members [of En no Kai] were interested in becoming. Ironically, in my attempt to investigate Buddhism on the ground at an urban temple, I was still very much imposing a top down, elite/popular framework for my questions.... By privileging a normative view of Buddhist salvation based on doctrinal texts I had failed to give due weight to this-worldly forms of daily succor. (146)

This realization seems to have had an impact on Rowe, as the coexistence of a multitude of Buddhisms, or Nichirenisms, and so on, is a common theme throughout the book. This approach ultimately drives Rowe's writing and represents an important development in the field of Buddhist studies.

In an effort to be as inclusive as possible, chapters 5 and 6 look to other sites of the "funerary problem" in Japan. Chapter 5 explores the Grave-Free Promotion Society (葬送の自由をすすめる会), an organization dedicated to what it calls "natural funerals," in which ashes are scattered in forests or at sea. The chapter covers the primary debates and controversies surrounding this still rarely-performed practice (scattering ashes comprised less than one percent of Japanese funerals in 2010). Most intriguing is Rowe's insight that most people's resistance to grave scattering came not from concerns over the threat to ancestral rites and traditional burial customs, but rather from concern with issues of purity, and that scattered human remains would pollute food and water sources (176).

Chapter six examines the work of sectarian research centers from the Jōdo, Sōtō, Shingon, and Nichiren schools in an effort to understand "Buddhist sects as self-

conscious institutions, made up of diverse voices struggling in different ways to maintain and propagate certain religious ideals across a broad and equally diverse constituency” (184). His analysis stresses the often uneven dialectic between sectarian researchers, who are trying to reconcile traditional funerary practices with the doctrine of no self and local priests who must often compromise doctrinal consistency in order to meet the needs of their congregation. Rowe illustrates how the sectarian researchers’ efforts often aggravate local priests, leading to a problem of confidence among many priests.

One place where the book especially excels is in the treatment of economic issues. Rowe carefully weighs the burden of costly funerals on the public, with the effect of lost revenue from abandoned graves on temples. He examines the financial considerations of various grave sites from the point of view of individuals and families, from municipal to private, religious to corporate-run graves that have borrowed names from Buddhist temples. Rowe also addresses the grey area in which temples, normally tax exempt organizations, are not being taxed on their income from their eternal grave revenues, which are presumably for profit. All of these examples call into question “frameworks that would presume to separate economic factors from religious concerns, faith from practicality, or religious consumption from other forms of consumerism” (110). Though these are just a few examples from the book, the sheer multitude and complexity of the economic forces surrounding this topic certainly reveal avenues for future research.

One question that stayed with me throughout the book centered on the perceived stability of temples. More than one of Rowe’s interviewees explains that a major draw to temple gravesites is the perception that temples are less vulnerable to market fluctuation, and are thus likely to be at risk of closure (when compared with commercial cemeteries). Yet at other points in the book, Rowe discusses the problem of unattended rural temples and temple gravesites and the strain this puts on head temples to address collapsing or closed temples. The question Rowe never addresses directly is: where does faith in the viability and sustainability of this new eternal grave system come from when it seems temples are closing their doors throughout Japan? The answer to this question could help him explain the success of the eternal grave system.

A final addition Rowe might consider is a greater examination of the funerary practices of Japanese Christians and New Religious Movements. This might seem an odd suggestion given that this is a book about Buddhism; however, he devotes his entire fifth chapter to the non-Buddhist practices of the Grave-Free Promotion Society. Though he makes occasional mention to the “threat” posed by New Religious Movements, it is unclear if this has anything to do with their funeral rites. Rowe does not address Christian funerals, but given Christianity’s long and complex history in Japan, it seems worthy of at least a brief discussion. But these are small points with an impressive book that makes a substantial contribution to the field of Buddhist and Japanese religious studies. Rowe’s work challenges the normative

discussion on the decline of Japanese Buddhism (due to its dependence on death rites) and instead highlights innovative practices from within Japanese temples that are adapting to the shifting social landscape. More specifically, a major contribution of the book is its thorough consideration of the psychological role *muen* plays in the minds of contemporary Japanese, and the possible connection between concern over *muen* and the recent proliferation of funerary options discussed by Rowe. The result is a more nuanced view of contemporary Japanese religious practice and what we can call “Japanese Buddhisms.” Rowe’s skillful consolidation of Japanese and English scholarship, years of fieldwork, and thought-provoking analysis has set a high standard for works on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. *Bonds of the Dead* would make an excellent read for scholars of any level interested in contemporary Japanese religion or the topic of death in Japan.

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