



Sébastien Penmellen Boret, *Japanese Tree Burial: Ecology, Kinship and the Culture of Death*

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IN RECENT YEARS, Japanese death-related beliefs and practices have received ample scholarly attention. Several scholars have documented and analyzed transformations in attitudes to death, funeral practices, and commemorative rituals (ROWE 2011; STONE and WALTER 2009; SUZUKI 2013). Sébastien Boret's recent book on Japanese tree burial follows this trend. It focuses on one case in particular: a temple in Ichinoseki (Iwate prefecture), which since 1999 has developed new tree burial practices (*jumokusō* 樹木葬) at two local forest cemetery sites. In contrast to the works by ROWE (2011) and STONE and WALTER (2009), Boret's book is not primarily concerned with the Buddhist institutional or theological aspects of these practices. Instead, it focuses on the invention of tree burial in relation to wider social and demographic changes, as well as contemporary environmental attitudes.

Japanese Tree Burial is based on anthropological field research conducted between 2006 and 2008 at the forest cemeteries in Ichinoseki, as well as in Tokyo, where many of the temple's subscribers live. Somewhat confusingly, it distinguishes between "tree burial" (a generic term referring to a wide variety of burial practices worldwide) and "Tree-Burial" (capitalized and hyphenated; used to refer to the supposedly unique practice developed in Ichinoseki). What makes this particular case unique, according to Boret, is its systematic character (that is, every grave gets its own tree, and the forest is carefully maintained), and the active involvement in environmental conservation of both the priest and the subscribers (9–10). The forest cemetery measures approximately 20,000 square meters, and consists mainly of native broad-leaved trees, thus contributing to ecological rehabilitation in an area characterized by its *sugi* 杉 monocultures. Reportedly, since the beginning of the project in 1999, approximately fifteen hundred people have signed up for a tree grave here (8)—including many Tokyoites, who for various reasons are not interested in a more traditional Buddhist funeral and grave.

Significantly, although developed by a Buddhist priest, the forest cemetery is not directly affiliated with the temple, and subscribers are free to opt for a non-Buddhist (Christian, Shinto, or secular) funeral ceremony if they prefer (17). Contrary to ordinary Buddhist practices, the dead do not receive a posthumous name, nor does the priest perform elaborate ritual ceremonies; consequently, the costs are significantly lower. This, I believe, is one of the main reasons behind the growing popu-

larity of such alternative burial practices, even if Boret insists that the “economical soundness of Japanese tree burial is not sufficient to justify, let alone understand, the subscribers’ choice and their growing popularity” (91). Although he may be downplaying the economic aspects too much, he is right to point out that there are other factors involved: the absence of descendants who can take care of the grave or family altar; a concern with nature conservation, and a corresponding nostalgia for traditional *satoyama* 里山 landscapes; and, importantly, the establishment of new social bonds, as Tree-Burial members regularly come together for memorial events and nature workshops.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of which approaches the main topic from a different thematic angle. Presented as more-or-less independent articles, each chapter has its own bibliography. This may be useful if you assign one or two chapters to students, but I found it inconvenient: as there is no general bibliography, the reader does not get a full overview of all the sources used, and it is difficult to look up titles later. In chapter 1, which serves as an introduction, Boret provides a cursory overview of tree burial around the world, ranging from traditional practices to modern ecological innovations. He then proceeds to discuss traditional Japanese attitudes to death and “ancestor worship,” as well as some recent transformations in this respect. In chapter 2, he describes Tree-Burial in modern detail, pointing to the ecological motivations behind its creation. He discusses the concept of *satoyama*—the idealized traditional landscape of Japan, which has come to be seen as ecologically important—and the problem of Japan’s postwar *sugi* plantations. For several reasons, this is the most interesting and important chapter of the book, as it is here that the connections are made between the ethnographic data and wider environmental discourse and practices. Boret rightly points out that *satoyama* are not just ecological models, but also cultural symbols, intertwined with normative notions of what constitutes authentic Japanese nature. Importantly, he also shows that environmental practices such as Tree-Burial can be contested, as local farmers may have different interests from, say, elderly city-dwellers with an interest in nature (51–56). Interesting though the material is, what I missed in this chapter was a sound theoretical foundation and explanation of the conceptual framework: for instance, Boret repeatedly uses terms such as “space of potentiality” and “localized place” without defining what he means, and without referring to existing spatial theories. As a result, his argument that through Tree-Burial a “space” is turned into a “place” (45) remains rather vague.

In subsequent chapters, Boret addresses various topics related to Tree-Burial. Chapter 3 consists of a lengthy general discussion of postwar demographic changes and the ways in which these have impacted funeral practices throughout the country. Chapter 4 looks at the issue of graves, personal identities, and social relations; it presents some fascinating ethnographic data on topics such as “posthumous divorce” (102–106), and looks at new types of “personalization” and “memorialization” of burial practices. Chapter 5 discusses the social activities that have been

developed around Tree-Burial, such as forest maintenance, hiking, and interdenominational memorial services (152–57), showing the relevance of these burial practices for establishing new community bonds. It also contains interesting reflections upon the notion of “invader species” in relation to conceptions of nature as intrinsically Japanese (136–46). Finally, chapter 6 explores notions of the afterlife in relation to rural nostalgia, fireflies, and notions of “ecological immortality.”

This is a rich and multi-faceted book, which explores several important social issues. The choice to focus on the relationship between attitudes to death and ecological issues—rather than, say, the religious-institutional aspects—is original, and leads to some interesting connections. Boret’s study provides an insightful illustration of the fact that conceptions of nature and environmental practices are deeply intertwined with personal identities and cultural attitudes, including notions of death and the afterlife. Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings. Although I understand the choice not to make Buddhism the main focus of the book, I would have liked to read more about the institutional context and responses. Changes in funeral practices are central to discussions about contemporary Japanese temple Buddhism, but Boret does not engage with these issues at all, and does not refer to recent studies on this topic (COVELL 2006; NELSON 2013), despite their relevance for his work. Likewise, considering the fact that this case study concerns a practice in Tōhoku, there should have been at least some reference to the disasters of 2011. I understand that most data for this book were collected before these events, but a brief description of their impact on Tree-Burial would have been welcome nonetheless. I also miss references to similar reforestation projects that have been developed in recent years. Boret suggests that Tree-Burial is a unique project, but the ecological workshops described in his book correspond to similar practices elsewhere. They seem to be based on the theories of the famous ecologist MIYAWAKI Akira 宮脇昭 (2000), which have influenced reforestation projects nationwide—including, significantly, in Iwate (for example, the *Mori wa umi no koibito* 森は海の恋人 project and the Great Forest Wall project)—but none of this is mentioned in the text. Thus, some important local and institutional contextualization is missing.

In addition, there are some shortcomings of a more editorial nature. The book has dozens of typos, spelling, and grammar mistakes, which distract from the actual content. One would expect a reputable publisher such as Routledge to be able to assist with some basic copyediting, especially considering the high price of the book, but apparently this is not the case: there are simply too many basic mistakes left in the text. In addition, there is too much repetition: some arguments and phrases are repeated not just once or twice but several times, which likewise distracts from the actual argument. In sum, this book could certainly have done with more and better copyediting.

Despite these shortcomings, however, *Japanese Tree Burial* is an interesting book, which provides fascinating ethnographic data and brings together several important topics that are not usually associated with each other. It offers some important

new insights on the relationship between environmental practices, social change, and notions of death. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in contemporary Japanese society, religion, and environmental issues.

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