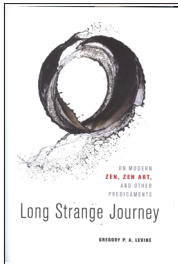


REVIEWS



Gregory P. A. Levine, *Long Strange Journey: On Modern Zen, Zen Art, and Other Predicaments*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 344 pages. Hardcover, \$62.00. ISBN: 978-0-824-85805-6.

IN THE INTEREST of full disclosure, I should begin by acknowledging that I agreed to do this review because I had already planned to read this book (in preparation for a class on Zen and popular culture) and also because I was fairly confident that I would like it—and indeed *Long Strange Journey* fully met my expectations. Gregory Levine takes Zen art as his primary focus, but, as he explains in the introduction, he treats Zen more broadly “as ‘both object *and* agent’ of modernization and globalization” (4), giving this book a larger audience than art historians. The introduction opens with a whirlwind tour of Zen’s “long, strange journey,” and then Levine proceeds to offer a typology of Zen: the most traditional, conservative type is that of ordained Zen monastic; next there is the Zen of teachers who primarily address themselves to lay audiences; there is also bookish Zen; and finally the Zen that uses it as a “guiding term” for consumers who are not necessarily engaged with communities of practice (12). Levine also notes other typologies, but his four Zens are useful guideposts for the discussions that follow.

The first chapter, “Zen Art Before Nothingness,” is a kind of prehistory, beginning with the first Western mention of the term “Zen” by Jesuits in the sixteenth century, through nineteenth century treatments of Japanese culture that generally do not include Zen, to the writings of Kuki Ryūichi (1852–1931) who drew connections “between Zen, art, and Japan” (33). In the early decades of the twentieth century these connections were cemented in the Western orientalist imaginaire, and they also served Japanese nation- or empire-building

efforts. In chapter 2, “Making Zen Modern,” Levine traces how Zen came to be seen as a form of modern universalism. D. T. Suzuki’s works are significant here, insofar as he made the argument that Zen was an expression of Japanese culture and spirituality, which provided the logic for Zen universalism. Suzuki himself maintained that meditation was key to understanding Zen, but others such as R. H. Blyth would begin to locate Zen in English literature. In this way, Zen began to move away from something that was exclusively Japanese “to become a transnational theory of counterculture ideology and action” (53).

In chapter 3, “Danxia Burns a Buddha,” Levine discusses Zen iconoclasm primarily through a case study of paintings of the monk Danxia burning a statue of the Buddha, thereby demonstrating that he was not attached to the idea of Buddha. D. T. Suzuki argued that Zen discipline prevented the ideas exemplified by Danxia from becoming antinomianism, yet Zen iconoclasm was at times “taken at face value by audiences in the West” (73–74). Chapter 4, “The Look and Logos of Zen Art,” examines the terms and qualities used to describe Zen art. Here Levine traces the belief that Zen art emerges from nothingness or from unmediated experience; this definition of Zen art raises the question of whether the unenlightened could ever meaningfully comment on it, a question that never appears in discourse about European art (81). This chapter concludes with a very interesting discussion of Murakami Takashi’s paintings of Bodhidharma. Picking up on the typologies outlined in the introduction, chapter 5, “Zen-Boom ‘Culture Wars’” looks at the claims about Zen made by different communities and the critiques made of Zen by those both within and outside the tradition. Chapter 6, “Zen Influence, Inherence, and Denial,” opens with a lengthy discussion of John Cage and his relationship with Zen, and then explores how Zen is used to label art as well as when artists or critics might want to deny a Zen connection. Levine concludes that “[a]rt was therefore part of the Zen ‘culture war’ of the late 1950s and early 1960s” (157).

In chapters 7 and 8, Levine brings up to the present day the discussion of what Zen represents. The seventh chapter, titled “What’s So Funny? Zen Cartoons, Zen Humor, and Bodhi-Characters,” spends a good deal of time on cartoons on Zen topics in the *New Yorker* magazine, and Levine effectively shows that the “limited range of content” in these cartoons reflects an “audience primed to recognize certain Zen tropes” (163–64). Levine also problematizes these representations, noting that at times depictions of Zen monks approach racist caricatures, that these cartoons reflect “clichés of Asian culture,” and that Asian-Americans are not portrayed in these contexts (166, 193). Chapter 8, “Zen Sells,” begins with a survey of the many products touted as Zen in the modern marketplace. Levine analyzes consumer Zen through a case study of Mercedes Benz’s use of Zen in commercials, and Jundo Cohen’s response as a Zen practitioner. Levine

also offers a careful reading of the Monastery Store (and its website) at the Zen Mountain Monastery, Mount Tremper, NY.

Toward the end of the final chapter, Levine writes about how his students at the University of California, Berkeley, have responded to Zen consumerism, and how they have brainstormed new Zen products together. Levine does not specify here whether these were undergraduate or graduate students, but as I was reading his book thinking, in part, about teaching Zen to undergraduates, I also thought about different audiences. Levine assumes some familiarity with Zen and with critical concepts such as nationalism and orientalism. Some readers might need to go elsewhere to become acquainted with John Cage and his work; other readers might not be familiar with *The Big Lebowski*. Levine's scholarly reach is wide, not only in terms of Zen studies, but also in culture, both high and low. As a result, sections of the book might be more accessible to certain readers than others; some chapters (especially chapter 7) work well on their own. The reader is almost certain to learn a great deal from Levine's work, and the notes and bibliography offer a wealth of sources for further exploration. I recommend it strongly to scholars of Japanese religion, Buddhism, orientalism, and modern culture.

As Levine notes in the coda, Zen's "long, strange journey" will continue on. I would like to conclude this review by noting a few intersections between Zen and the contemporary world that I think will merit more attention in future years. In chapter 8, Levine briefly discusses Zen in Silicon Valley, and earlier he had noted the Zen aesthetics of Apple (88); given the centrality of technology—often originating out of Silicon Valley—to our modern lives, the impact of Zen, or Zen rhetoric, merits further exploration. Additionally, on the final page of the book, Levine points to "globalized 'New Asia'" (243), and this opens another field of inquiry. Much of the Zen Levine discusses is that produced by non-Asian Americans and some Europeans; they are often in dialogue with Japanese artists and Buddhists. Throughout the book, Levine carefully uses "Chan/Sōn/Zen/Thiền" to indicate the broader tradition, and it would be interesting to know the impact of what Levine terms a "Zenny zeitgeist" on Asian-American communities, or how a particular kind of Western Zen has circulated as a global commodity.

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