



Bryan D. Lowe, *Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan*

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IN MANY WAYS, Bryan Lowe's analysis of Nara textual materials in *Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan* is similar to Ryūichi Abé's treatment of Heian documents in his now classic *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse*. Both works tackle primary and secondary sources in ways that challenge the normative view of Nara and Heian Buddhism. Likewise, both Abé and Lowe are interested in theories of language and the power of ritual to transform political and social orders. Readers will also recognize that *Ritualized Writing* shares common themes with other recent scholarship, including Michael Como's *Weaving and Binding: Immigrant Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan*. Each of these works contest accepted scholarly perceptions handed down since the Meiji period.

Lowe's main argument in the book is that sutra-copying was not always done in the service of so-called "state Buddhism," countering a claim that scholars have alleged about Nara Buddhism since the Meiji period. To offset this notion, the author presents evidence of a variety of social situations in which texts were ritually produced and speculates about their functions, although he is careful to distance himself from the pitfalls of strict functionalism early in the manuscript. In this context, "ritually produced" means that special arrangements were made to purify the scribes and their equipment before copying began, certain production conventions were followed during copying, and special concluding procedures were arranged and carried out. Lowe contrasts these procedures, for example, with different writing tasks carried out by scribes and others. He also looks at copying procedures in other social situations and societies including *chishiki* 知識, Buddhist fellowship societies that claimed to undertake sutra-copying for individual cultivation as well as a bodhisattva activity that benefits sentient beings.

Lowe's sources are also significant to researchers, particularly his use of Shōsōin documents and their colophons. Shōsōin was a repository for texts and objects held at Tōdaiji. These long-neglected documents were recently rediscovered and are currently being investigated by Japanese scholars. The book emerged from Lowe's unique use of the repository, which is reproduced in the

Dai Nihon Komonjo 大日本古文書 (Old documents of Japan) published by the Historiographical Institute of the University of Tokyo. On the one hand, the Shōsōin documents are valuable for the fact that they occasionally were used for other purposes, such as to record notes on the backside of the original texts. These documents have provided insights into daily life during the Nara period. On the other hand, the *Dai Nihon Komonjo* contains many errors and is organized in awkward ways, problems that Lowe certainly had to deal with.

The book is divided into three distinct but interwoven parts, respectively made up of two chapters. The first of these chapters opens with a description from the *Nihon Ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (Records of the numinous and strange from Japan) about a monk named Muro, who made a vow to copy the *Lotus Sutra* “in accord with the [correct] method” (29). This method included purifying his body and other processes explained throughout the chapter. However, Lowe does not note that the *Nihon Ryōiki* is a Heian period hagiographical writing primarily about alleged Nara period miracles. As such, the text might tell us more about sutra-copying in the Heian period than the Nara period.

Chapter 2 examines the form and function of *ganmon* 願文, prayer texts used for dedication ceremonies. The author portrays *ganmon* as dynamic texts “that record active processes of world creation, in which a version of the cosmos and an understanding of human relations come into being through ritual practice, an act whose creativity emerges, not in tension with but as a result of social norms and generic expectations” (58). This dynamic process is central to his argument that Nara Buddhism cannot simply be called “state Buddhism.”

Chapter 3 looks at the role of Buddhist fellowship societies played in copying sutras. The chapter primarily draws on research found in the *Dai Nihon Komonjo* documents. Buddhist fellowship societies arose in the seventh and eighth centuries and are believed to have played an important role in spreading Buddhism in Japan. Often drawing support from powerful clans, the societies built bridges, temples, dikes, and other structures, as well as copying sutras. In fact, Lowe states, the number of such texts produced by these societies exceeded those commissioned by royalty and aristocrats of the time (84), which supports his argument that sutra-copying activities during the Nara period were not simply a form of “state Buddhism.” Lowe introduces Benjamin Read’s idea of “straddlers” to explain how these societies had multiple institutional connections. However, in previous chapters Lowe writes that textual production in the Nara period was inherently social (84). It seems to me that such activities were also inherently political (that is, an instrument of the state). The designation of “straddlers” might have better served his overall argument if it had been used throughout the book rather than only in this chapter and the epilogue. Furthermore, if we accept that textual production is inherently social, then all writers are straddlers, in which case the term may become valueless.

The final two chapters of the book are the most passionately written, and they perhaps contain the most valuable information for scholars and students of Nara Buddhism. Lowe uses the Shōsōin documents to uncover several facts about a scribe named Hitonari, such as his daily work schedule and the average lines of texts he produced per day. Based on this evidence, Lowe speculates about Hitonari's life, work, and ambitions. For example, he analyzes the scribe's handwriting, making assessments about how he used different styles for different purposes. He also analyzes his poetry, framing it in the context of Nara period verse. Lowe proposes that the Office of Sutra Transcription could have functioned as a place for low-ranking officials to gain skills at reading Buddhist texts.

While rejecting the "state Buddhism" model appears to liberate us from the common framework and opens new possibilities for analysis, I found Lowe's arguments that it is possible to determine the reason for copying a particular text based on the internal motivations of a scribe or his patrons and whether a text was copied due to its content or magical efficacy to be equally problematic. Lowe contends that these features can be determined based on evidence in the colophons. He writes in the introduction to chapter 4, "A full understanding of scriptural cultures in ancient Japan demands careful attention to the particular institutional configurations..." (107). Again, on page 151, he writes, "Was the fact that some scriptorium workers aspired to the monastic path coincidental?... What was the historical relationship between clerk and cleric? Solving these problems requires an evaluation of what it meant to be a monk in the mid-eighth century." Just as it is impossible to have a full understanding of scriptural cultures, it is equally implausible to solve the problem (if it is a problem) of why someone became a monk in the Nara period. In addition to requiring knowledge of every social system and contingency for behavior, it would necessitate knowing what the person was thinking.

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