



Edward R. Drott, *Buddhism and the Transformation of Old Age in Medieval Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 272 pages. Paper, \$60.00. ISBN: 9780824851507.

THERE ARE FEW books in the field that work as deftly across multiple textual genres and historical periods as Edward Drott's *Buddhism and the Transformation of Old Age*. In the tradition of his late advisor, William LaFleur, Drott not only elucidates the central role played by literature and religion in the *longue durée* of premodern Japanese history but also pioneers new methods and approaches to the study of the premodern period. Drawing inspiration from recent work in the fields of critical theory and gender studies, Drott explores the ways that the aged body was used to distinguish between centers and margins of power in premodern Japan. His analysis calls special attention to a key transformation that took place in the transition from the early to the medieval period whereby the aged body, rather than a mark of human weakness, ugliness, and pollution, became a symbol of otherworldly power. In examining this transformation, Drott attempts to demonstrate that it was situated in, and contributed to, the emergence of a new "symbolic vocabulary for expressing sacred and political power" in the late Heian period (ca. 1050–1185) (x). Drott is thus fundamentally concerned with the performative nature of representations of the aged body. He shows us that "calling oneself or another old was never a simple act of describing an objective fact, it was an act of representation, identity formation, and social positioning" (xi). Contrary especially to our contemporary biological discourse on old age, the aging process, we learn, is not something that just happens to us as a natural fact of our existence but rather something that must be performed, represented, and imagined. As such, its significance extends beyond typical existential questions of death and finitude and into the social sphere of politics and power.

The book is divided into two parts. The first considers the early period (ca. 500–1050), the second the medieval (ca. 1050–1500). Each part features a short introduction, and the chapters are brief, never running over twenty-five pages. The concision of Drott's presentation, together with the clarity of his prose, makes this book a pleasure to read.

Part 1, "Making Elders Others in Early Japan," examines the ways in which the court in the Nara and early Heian periods used old age as a "symbolic scapegoat" against which it attempted to establish the supremacy of its own authority.

Drott's sources are eclectic: court chronicles (*Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*), petitions to retire from court office (*chijihyō*), poetic anthologies (*Man'yōshū* and *Kaifūsō*), Genshin's (942–1017) charter for the Śākyamuni assembly of Reizan'in, a collection of Buddhist tales (*Hokke genki*), and *The Tale of Genji*. Of the three chapters in this first part of the book, I found chapter one, "Aged Earth Gods and Majestic Imperial Ancestors: The Uses of Old Age in Early Japanese Myth," to be particularly illuminating. Here, Drott calls attention to the use of old age by the court to marginalize the power of nonroyal clans and other kinship groups. The gods of these clans, Drott notes, are consistently portrayed as elders.

While such representations have recently been invoked in contemporary Japan as evidence of a long-lost respect for elders, Drott places them in their political context and shows us that, in that context, representations of gods as aged did not necessarily connote respect for the elderly. In his analysis, Drott discerns a consistent pattern in the figurative strategies of early Japanese myth. Whereas the "earthly gods" (*kunitsukami*) of nonroyal clans tend to be presented as elders, the "heavenly gods" (*amatsukami*) of the royal clan are depicted as youthful and full of creative vitality. In attributing old age to the gods of nonroyal clans, Drott argues, the royal court was able to effectively symbolize their submissive, nonthreatening status. Hence, Drott contends that representations of old age should be understood as a strategy for legitimating the sacred authority of the royal clan.

This argument, it should be noted, is not without its problematic assumptions. As Richard BOWRING (2009, 53) has pointed out, it is not self-evident that all the early myths were entirely the inventions of sixth- and seventh-century ideologues. Indeed, MATSUMAE Takeshi's (1993) classic essay, which is cited by Drott, suggests otherwise. That notwithstanding, there is no doubt that political concerns surrounding the legitimacy of the emperor played a significant role in the compilation of early Japanese myth, and Drott's analysis greatly advances our understanding of how the rhetorical structure of myth was shaped by and contributed to that important aspect of the court's political agenda.

Part 2, "Reappraising the Aged Body in Medieval Japan," considers the ways that various actors in the margins of medieval Japanese society—both lay and ordained—reimagined old age as part of a strategy to challenge the established social hierarchies of the center. Spanning four chapters, Drott's analysis draws on a variety of genres: Buddhist tales (*setsuwa*), legends of the sacred origins of temples (*engi*), biographies of people who have attained rebirth in the pure land (*ōjōden*), diaries of pilgrims (*kikō*), and theoretical and dramatic works from Noh. The first of the four chapters, "From Outcast to Saint: Overcoming Pollution in an Age of Decline," is pivotal, as it is here that Drott, looking at stories from Buddhist tale collections, attempts to demonstrate his thesis that it was during the late Heian period (ca. 1050–1185) that old age began to be reimagined.

To frame his discussion, Drott describes as the background for the reimagination of old age the disintegration of the *ritsuryō* system and the rise of private wealth and influence, or what historians often term the power bloc, or *kenmon*, system. This is no easy task, and Drott's discussion could have benefited from more extensive engagement with the vast Japanese-language scholarship on the topic, particularly by some of the Japanese scholars he mentions in his acknowledgments and cites in the bibliography, Uejima Susumu and Hayami Tasuku in particular.

As a cultural historian, Drott is, of course, more interested in the imagination of power than its actual functioning. Hence, his characterization of this social transformation calls attention to a shift in the understanding of purity upon which the center of power was founded: whereas in early Japan, the power of the center was predicated on forms of purity achieved through the observance of taboos (what Drott calls “physical purity”), in the medieval period moral wholesomeness (what he calls “moral purity”) came to serve as the basis for claims to power. This is a fascinating claim and one that is crucial to his argument. Rather than tracing this shift in understandings of purity, however, Drott proceeds to discuss the institutional and economic transformations that supported it, such as the formation of the regency (*sekkanke*) and the rise of the *shōen* system. This is convenient for the sake of his narrative, as it allows him to move on to a consideration of tales about the power of moral purity to overcome physical impurity and to trump even the sovereign authority of the *tennō* in the mid-eleventh century collection, the *Hokke genki*. In doing so, he implies that it was tales such as these that contributed to the formation of a new understanding of what it means to be pure. However, there is a longer history that needs to be told here, one that begins with the Buddhist reforms of Emperor Shōmu (725–749), particularly his 734 edict that for full ordination, Buddhist novices must have completed three years of “pure conduct” (*jōgyō*).

While Drott overlooks these early stages in the reconfiguration of understandings of purity, his discussion of the sociopolitical implications of this reconfiguration from the late Heian on is compelling. Each of the four chapters in part 2 greatly enhance our understanding of a key sociocultural process that has heretofore received little attention: namely, the crucial role played by Buddhist practice—and the understandings of the ends of human life that it supported—in the transformation of politics and society in the transition from the early to medieval period.

Drott's book is a valuable contribution to the study of religion and literature in premodern Japan. His analysis is consistently incisive, and he never fails to shed light on the workings of political forces in Buddhist literary expression from diverse periods of Japanese history. There are times, as I suggest above, that this reader at least wonders the extent to which we can assume that the

writers and performers of premodern Japanese literature were always “intuitively attempt[ing] to push back against limitations imposed on them by powers entrenched in social structures” (xvii). Have humans really always been so instrumental in “work[ing] within or against established social codes to advance their interests” (xvii)? The question of human interest is a difficult one. Whatever one’s stance on it may be, Drott’s argument that even something so seemingly natural as the aging process does not proceed unaffected by political interests is worthy of serious consideration. In a time when there is an increasing sense that our modern society devalues the wisdom and experience of the elderly, *Buddhism and the Transformation of Old Age in Medieval Japan* reminds us that what old age means is never fixed, and that, indeed, there are “various ways people made old age meaningful” (xviii).

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