Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 52: 127–143

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.52.2025.127-143

Bryan D. Lowe

Reflections on Esoteric Hegemony in Medieval Japan and the Modern Academy

This review essay examines four recent titles that deal with esoteric Buddhism in medieval Japan: *Kamakura Bukkyō: Mikkyō no shiten kara* (Daizō Shuppan, 2023); *Rituals of Initiation and Consecration in Premodern Japan: Power and Legitimacy in Kingship, Religion, and the Arts* (De Gruyter, 2022); *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023); and *Esoteric Zen: Zen and the Tantric Teachings in Premodern Japan* (Brill, 2023). They all helpfully challenge sectarian narratives by showing how esoteric Buddhism permeated various medieval schools. In doing so, these works build upon Kuroda Toshio's idea of a hegemonic exoteric-esoteric system (*kenmitsu taisei*), a concept now fifty years old. While Kuroda's ongoing influence on recent scholarship, including the volumes under review, has been a net positive for the field, my essay raises questions about the definition and coherence of the term "esoteric Buddhism." It also encourages future scholars to examine other non-esoteric aspects of medieval Japanese religions.

KEYWORDS: esoteric Buddhism—Kuroda Toshio—Kamakura Buddhism—Zen—Pure Land—*kanjō*

Bryan D. Lowe is Associate Professor of Religion at Princeton University.

A high school friend of mine was once arrested for graffiti. The officer, who caught my friend, asked what he had written. My friend replied, "esoteric." The officer, confused by this unexpected response, followed up, "What's that mean?"

The story, which reads like a Zen encounter dialogue, is true but has a punchline. If esoteric means "Designed for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples; communicated to, or intelligible by, the initiated exclusively," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* would have it, how could my friend reveal the term's meaning to the cop? He was stuck and ended up in handcuffs.

The police officer's simple question and my friend's paralysis are surely familiar to scholars of Buddhism. The word "esoteric" (*mitsu* 密) shows up everywhere in primary sources and secondary scholarship. Defining it, however, proves difficult, if not impossible. This is not only because of the secrecy that supposedly surrounded esoteric traditions, but also because of the term's protean quality. There are many definitions with little consensus. Some see it as rhetorical, others as institutional. Is it simply a superlative for "the best" (McBride 2004, 355)? A sect (Chou 1945, 245–247)? A school (Goble 2019, 1)? Perhaps esoteric is what practitioners do. Could it refer to a gradually developing set of rituals, culminating in practices tied to mandalas (Shinohara 2014, xii–xiv)? Or a form of Buddhism centered on initiations that grant authority (Wedemeyer 2013, 9). Maybe it's more about what people collectively say or think? A religious discourse (Abé 1999, 4)? An episteme (Rambelli 2013, 5–6)? If there is "a there there," to riff on Gertrude Stein, no one can agree on what it is.

While few, if any, are certain about what esoteric Buddhism means, most scholars agree that it was everywhere in medieval Japan and beyond. Esoteric Buddhism is most famously associated with Kūkai 空海 (779–835) and the Shingon school that he supposedly founded, but it also played a key role in the thought and practice of the Tendai tradition (for example, Dolce 2011). Recent works, including books under review in this article, describe "Esoteric Zen" (Licha 2023) and "Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" (Proffitt 2023). Beyond Japan, scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism speak of "Esoteric Theravada" (Crosby 2020). Some even claim that "it was the Buddhism scholars commonly designate 'esoteric Buddhism' that had the greatest geographical spread of any form of Buddhism" (Orzech, Payne, and Sørensen 2011, 3). Once ignored by scholars in favor of Zen, esoteric Buddhism is now ubiquitous in academic publications.

In this essay, I am concerned with how the category functions in the study of medieval Japanese Buddhism. Overall, the turn to esotericism has been a net positive for the field. The recent revisionist scholarship helpfully counteracts earlier preferences for an idealized "Protestant Buddhism," divorced from ritual and iconography. It also combats sectarian myths of purity that treat schools as hermetically sealed entities, uncorrupted by esoteric influence. The new consensus better captures the messiness of Japanese religions, painting a more realistic picture of the age, one less colored by nineteenth-century assumptions about religion and less defined by teleological, sectarian narratives.

All of the books under review build upon the insights of the historian Kuroda Toshio, who, in a landmark study from 1975, overturned standard models in the fields of medieval Japanese history and religions. Before Kuroda, scholars typically treated the founders of the so-called new Kamakura schools, such as Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262), Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282), and Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), as the heroes of the day who revolutionized medieval religions and brought Buddhism to the populace for the first time. In place of this simplistic story, which, not uncoincidentally, served sectarian interests, Kuroda pointed to the continued dominance of the older, mainstream schools, which he saw as promoting an "exoteric-esoteric system" that provided the ideological justification of the social and political order. The system presumably included both exoteric and esoteric elements, but Kuroda, and subsequent scholars, typically emphasized the esoteric, noting that the entire system was "predicated on a belief in the absolute superiority of the esoteric teachings," and emerged from "a process where all religions and schools were subsumed under the esoteric teachings and formed a unified system" (Kuroda 1996, 251–252). While all of the books under review refine Kuroda's thesis, his shadow looms, and most works today accept his general emphasis on esoteric Buddhism as a dominant ideological force. Kuroda's *kenmitsu taisei* 顯密体制, first used to describe a medieval hegemony, has itself become hegemonic in the academy.

Still, questions remain. Most centrally, what is esoteric Buddhism? But also, how and why did esoteric Buddhism gain supremacy? Is its persuasive power rooted in economic might? The aesthetics of its ritual? The elegance of its doctrines? When did esoteric dominance start, and how long did it last? Were there shifts over time? Should scholars continue to use Kuroda's framework, fifty years after it was first introduced? What is gained or lost by doing so?

In this essay, I hope to explore some of these questions by looking at four recent books in the field that show both the utility and limits of the term "esoteric." To borrow language from Clifford Geertz, the study of esoteric Buddhism is a field "whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other" (Geertz 1973, 29). This essay neither overturns the established consensus

nor proposes an alternative. If it is successful, it will have refined the debate, calling for just a touch more precision and open-mindedness.

The first study under review, the edited volume *Kamakura Bukkyō: Mikkyō no shiten kara*, emerged out of a 2016–2021 series of conferences and colloquia organized by the Chisan Kangakukai, a transectarian research organization affiliated with the Chisan branch of the Shingon school. The volume, practically a who's who of Japanese scholars of medieval Buddhism, is organized into four parts on the following topics: the place of Kamakura Buddhism within esoteric Buddhism as a whole; developments in intellectual history; esoteric Buddhism across sects; and something of a hodgepodge final section on the so-called Tachikawa school, esoteric forms of Shinto, and literature's relationship to Buddhism.

The first chapter in part one, by Kikuchi Hiroki 菊地大樹, introduces a newly discovered source, likely by Yōsai 栄西 (1141–1215), the purported founder of Rinzai Zen, on the Gumonjihō 求聞持法, a ritual that grants total recall. In doing so, Kikuchi shows how esoteric ideas permeated Zen. He also provides an alternative model of Kamakura Buddhism, one that focuses on the integrative unification of teachings rather than exclusive devotion to a single practice. Taira Masayuki 平雅行 looks at esoteric Buddhism in the Kamakura region of eastern Japan. As he notes, Kamakura was closely connected to the religious life of the western capital and its surroundings. This conclusion is important, because one of Kuroda's recent critics, Sasaki Kaoru (1997, 7–19, 208–286), has argued that the *kenmitsu taisei* only existed in western Japan. Taira rebuts this thesis. Nagamura Makoto 永村眞, one of Japan's leaders in the emerging study of manuscripts preserved in temple libraries and archives known as *shōgyō* 聖教 (sacred teachings), uses these materials to gently refine Kuroda's thesis by demonstrating the diversity found within Buddhist texts across space and time. Kuroda's model tends toward totalization, but Nagamura's ground-level approach reveals a more fragmented and complex world, albeit one in which esoteric Buddhism played an undeniable role.

The next two chapters deal more directly with Buddhist doctrine. Ōkubo Ryōshun's 大久保良峻 chapter focuses on buddha-body theories, particularly those about the self-enjoyment body (*jijuyūshin* 自受用身). His research reveals the deep entanglement between Tendai's esoteric (Taimitsu) tradition and that of Shingon (Tōmitsu). Monks from both camps read one another's works, sometimes accepting and sometimes criticizing their purported opponents. In medieval Japan, esoteric Buddhism was not hermetic. It was a shared, trans-sectarian doctrinal conversation. While Ōkubo's piece focuses mostly on Taimitsu monks but also looks at Shingon figures, Kobayashi Jōten 小林靖典 examines debates within Shingon between the Shingi and Kogi factions. They argued over which body of the *dharmakāya* preached. The Kogi tradition maintained it was the "original ground body" (*honjishin* 本地身), while Shingi scholastics asserted that

it was the "empowerment body" (*kajishin* 加持身), a form intended to help sentient beings of inferior wisdom who could not understand teachings without the use of signifiers. While scholars often treat the esoteric worldview as monolithic, these two chapters reveal how fragmented it was, with major disagreements on fundamental matters of doctrine. In addition, by delving into the doctrinal minutiae, the authors of these chapters show that esoteric Buddhism was not merely an ideological tool, the feature that Kuroda emphasized. Rather, for many monks, esoteric Buddhism was primarily an intellectual and philosophical enterprise, aimed at resolving doctrinal problems that emerged out of contradictory or unclear canonical texts.

Part three contains four chapters that look at esoteric Buddhism across sects. Ōtsuka Norihiro 大塚紀弘 points out that even so-called exoteric temples often included esoteric instruction. As numerous monks returned from Song China, however, new identities and institutions emerged based on the *zen-kyō-ritsu* 禅教律 (meditation-teachings-precepts) framework, ones that were irreducible to esoteric Buddhism, while also not entirely separate from its influence. In this way, Ōtsuka's piece both refines the *kenmitsu taisei* framework by showing the importance of *zen-ritsu* identity, while also demonstrating the ongoing influence of both exoteric and esoteric study throughout the medieval period. Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士 homes in on the relationship between esoteric Buddhism and Zen, summarizing some of his writings on the topic published over the past decade. Sueki deconstructs notions of a "pure Zen" by focusing especially on Yōsai and his contribution to the debate over which body of the *dharmakāya* preached, a broader doctrinal conflict also described by Kobayashi. Sueki demonstrates the porosity of *shū* 宗, often rendered as "sect" in English, arguing that whatever *shū* might have been in the medieval period, it was by no means closed off. While most of the authors under review focus on the tolerant attitudes of monks who incorporated esoteric Buddhism into their writings, Maegawa Ken'ichi 前川健一 takes up Nichiren, who lambasted the court for relying on esoteric prayers in the face of Mongol invasions. In this case, it would have been helpful for Maegawa to engage with English-language scholarship. In particular, Lucia Dolce, who has looked at many of the same sources studied by Maegawa, reached the opposite conclusion:

> In spite of his condemnation of esoteric Buddhism, Nichiren's endeavor to articulate a "new" practice implied a complex process of appropriation of esoteric categories and icons that one can hardly imagine to have been unconscious. I am convinced that Nichiren, far from forsaking *mikkyō* after his definitive commitment to the *Lotus Sūtra*, continued to pursue his study of esotericism, and from this source drew inspiration for his reformulation of Tendai *Lotus* thought. His interest in esoteric notions and practices perhaps

> even increased with time, together with his apparent criticism of the esoteric tradition. Dolce (1999, 377)

It seems, at least possible, that even the most vocal critics of esoteric Buddhism never fully escaped its logic. The final chapter in part three by Noro Sei 野呂靖 turns to medieval Kegon and its relationship to esoteric Buddhism, a comparatively little-known topic. As Noro demonstrates, from at least the Heian period, Kegon monks took an interest in notions of buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏) and the *dharmakāya* preaching. Moreover, Shingon authors were aware of trends at Tōdaiji 東大寺, the center of Kegon studies, and even wrote commentaries on Kegon texts. Altogether, the chapters in part three reveal porous boundaries and open exchange amongst medieval schools. Esoteric Buddhism was a constant topic of conversation and debate, if not a unifying, hegemonic ideology.

Part four turns to the monastic margins with chapters on the supposedly heretical Tachikawa school, Shinto, and esoteric literature. Iyanaga Nobumi 彌永信美 offers an updated distillation of his now voluminous publications in English and Japanese on the Tachikawa movement, emphasizing the importance of and difficulties in developing a concrete and precise vocabulary and method for distinguishing discursive texts and on-the-ground practice. Despite polemical claims to the contrary, Tachikawa, as practiced, seems to have been a not especially out-of-the-ordinary movement. The next chapter by Itō Satoshi 伊藤聡 looks at Ryōbu Shintō, which is famously indebted to esoteric Buddhism and well-known in English. Itō's findings that Zen monks, who imported new commentaries on *Laozi* 老子, had a major influence on the emergence of Ryōbu Shintō are especially noteworthy. Itō's essay, much like Ōtsuka's, complicates our narrative of esoteric dominance; Zen and other traditions also shaped the medieval episteme. The final chapter, by Takahashi Shūjō 高橋秀城, surveys the relationship between esoteric Buddhism and literature. While the category of "Buddhist literature" is often used, Takahashi proposes a framework of "esoteric literature," which he situates within a Shingon cultural sphere. Esoteric literature included diverse perspectives, ranging from those described as primarily literary to ones that are more explicitly religious. These chapters make it clear that esotericism's reach was broad, extending into literary and Shinto traditions. However, the question of whether esoteric logics dominated these spheres remains open to debate. The volume as a whole suggests that Kuroda's thesis, while inescapable, requires at least some revisioning to better account for the contributions of non-esoteric discourses and practices.

Of the books under review, Fabio Rambelli and Or Porath's edited volume, *Rituals of Initiation and Consecration in Premodern Japan: Power and Legitimacy in Kingship, Religion, and the Arts*, is the only one that does not use the word

"esoteric" in the title. Instead, it focuses on a ritual known as *kanjō* 灌頂, literally "pouring [water] on the top [of the head]" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 1). The ritual is often understood as an initiation ceremony, but the editors argue it is better translated as consecration. As they explain, *kanjō* was the culmination of a longer process that started with initiation but ultimately transformed the initiant into a higher being or buddha. This impressive volume covers a wide geographic region and swath of time, gathering together leading scholars from North America, Europe, and Japan across disciplines (it is still worth noting that only three of the nineteen chapters are by women, which is three more than *Kamakura Bukkyō: Mikkyō no shiten kara*).

For our purposes, consecration rituals are important because of their deep, complex connection to esoteric Buddhism. The precise nature of the relationship between esoteric theory and ritual practice, however, is somewhat opaque. Toward the start of their introductory essay, Rambelli and Porath (2022, 6) argue that the medieval esoteric "episteme" helped generate *kanjō* rituals: "[T]he hegemony of Esoteric Buddhism in Japanese society, and at court in particular, was instrumental in the development of *kanjō* consecrations for the emperor." In other cases, the two seem to work in tandem, as the "rituals were a natural complement to the semiotics of Esoteric Buddhism" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 13). In still others, consecration facilitates the spread of esoteric Buddhism, serving as "a vehicle by which such semiotics were transmitted" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 29). Finally, the editors occasionally posit an even stronger agency for *kanjō* rituals, which seem to define and regulate esoteric Buddhism; "consecration rituals control the structuring and the reproduction of the Buddhist Esoteric system" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 15). These four statements are in tension with one another, but they are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive. Still, future scholars need to more systematically assess the relationship between practice and knowledge and outline a coherent ritual theory, describing how it is possible for consecration rituals to control the very structure of the episteme from which they emerge.

Four parts follow the introduction. The first, with chapters by David Gordon White, Mori Masahide, Dominic Steavu, and Adam Krug, deals with continental precedents and examples from South Asia, China, and Tibet. Mori's chapter is especially important for scholars of Japanese Buddhism, as it meticulously traces the history of consecration rituals in South Asian materials (often using sources preserved in Chinese) to highlight several features that would reappear in Japan, including flower-tossing initiation rituals, water pouring, and secrecy. Steavu's chapter complicates this neat Buddhist-centered narrative by highlighting possible Daoist sources for consecration as well. More work is needed on the genealogy of consecration rituals, which will surely reveal a convoluted web of influences rather than a straightforward lineage.

The second part focuses on imperial consecrations in medieval Japan. It is bookended by the first imperial *kanjō*, definitively proven by Ryūichi Abé to have been performed by Kūkai in 822, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when, as Matsumoto Ikuyo shows, esoteric enthronement rituals formally ended, despite a push by some Buddhist clerics for their revival. Susan Klein's chapter, which appears between Abé's and Matsumoto's, makes a crucial methodological intervention. She argues that scholars need to consider the agency of literary figures in shaping religious traditions. Whether one accepts her speculative thesis that the poet Fujiwara no Tameaki 藤原為顕 (ca. 1230s–1290s) helped develop enthronement consecration ceremonies or not, Klein's broader point that "it might be useful to consider the possibility that literary and artistic figures played an active role in the construction of political and religious culture, including the development of important religio-political rituals" is crucial (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 156). Notably, most of the other research discussed in this review essay focuses almost exclusively on monks. We need to broaden our perspective to examine how other non-monastic actors shaped esoteric Buddhism and the broader religious world of Japan.

Part three is the longest section of the book, with eight chapters on the "religious developments of the imperial consecration." Abé Yasurō's chapter surveys an impressive amount of materials to provide a sweeping overview, which is followed by studies of particular types of consecration: *kechien kanjō* 結縁灌頂 (Tomishima Yoshiyuki), *kai kanjō* 戒灌頂 (Paul Groner), *yugi kanjō* 瑜祇灌頂 (Lucia Dolce), *shintō kanjō* 神道灌頂 (Itō Satoshi), *chigo kanjō* 児灌頂 (Or Porath), *jinzen kanjō* 深仙灌頂 (Kawasaki Tsuyoshi), and *buchū kanjō* 峰中灌頂 (Andrea Castiglioni). Throughout these chapters, the authors frequently reference unpublished materials from temple archives, and Dolce's chapter in particular includes informative photographs of the various manuscripts and diagrams that shed light on an otherwise mysterious ritual. Collectively, the chapters show how *kanjō* rituals transcended various boundaries, including those defined by sect, gender, the lay-monastic divide, center and periphery, and Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. For our purposes, Groner's chapter is especially pertinent, as it questions whether *kanjō* rituals were really "esoteric" at all. As he succinctly puts it, "the term 'consecration' did not necessarily indicate a close connection with Esoteric Buddhism" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 256). The word "esoteric" appears in this book about ten times as much as "exoteric," and as noted above, the editors (rightly) treat the ritual as central to a larger esoteric hegemony. Groner's chapter, however, reminds us that the esoteric episteme may not have been quite so hegemonic; original enlightenment thought and exoteric scriptures were equally valid resources for doctrinal justification and ritual practice.

Part four demonstrates how consecration rituals spilled beyond the walls of the monastery into the arts. In this way, these chapters can be seen as a response

to Klein's challenge to attend to non-monastic agents. Unno Keisuke's chapter looks at consecration rituals tied to the transmission of Japanese poetry (*waka* 和歌). He argues that these rituals were "envisioned as a copy of a Buddhist ceremony" and points out fascinating esoteric Buddhist interpretations of poetry, such as "the idea that the god of waka Kakinomoto no Hitomaro and Dainichi Nyorai are one and the same" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 412, 415). In contrast, Inose Chihiro's study of *kanjō* in the transmission of secret melodies for the *biwa* 琵琶, *shō* 笙, and *koto* 箏, reveals comparatively thin Buddhist associations, ones that eventually disappeared. Groner cautioned against limiting *kanjō* to esoteric Buddhism; Inose's findings suggest that consecration eventually transcended Buddhism altogether. Rambelli's analysis, in the final chapter in the volume, resembles Inose's in that he sees the *shō kanjō* as "secularized" with less pronounced Buddhist content than the *biwa kanjō*. However, he concludes that "*shō kanjō* is in itself a microcosm of the Esoteric episteme in which it was rooted" (Rambelli and Porath 2022, 457). For Rambelli, the esoteric episteme does not require explicit Buddhist symbols or language; it provides an invisible framework for the entire interpretive world, whether premodern authors were aware of it or not. I see these differences between Inose and Rambelli as illustrative of overarching but unresolved questions that haunt the field: what gets classified as esoteric Buddhism and who gets to decide?

Overall, I found Rambelli and Porath's centering of *kanjō* to be a useful approach, one that avoids some of the definitional problems with the category of esoteric Buddhism. After reading their introduction and the essays that followed, I wondered if the field could benefit from more attention to specific ritual practices and less reliance on sometimes polemical and abstract categories like esoteric Buddhism. Building off of Proffitt and Licha's studies to be discussed below, one could, for example, undertake a transsectarian study of *nenbutsu* or embryology. I suspect this type of project would challenge Protestant and sectarian narratives, just as attention to esoteric Buddhism has done. However, it would potentially open up new research questions and avoid both the vagueness and insularity that have come to characterize the study of esoteric Buddhism in both Japanese and English. I hope to see more books like Rambelli and Porath's in the future.

As edited volumes, the first two titles should be celebrated for their breadth. The next two books under review are monographs, which, as would be expected, have tighter foci and sharper theses. As Aaron P. Proffitt (2023, xi) describes it, *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* focuses on "a monk and his text." The monk is Dōhan 道範 (1179–1252), and his text is the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* 秘密念仏抄 (*Compendium on the Secret Contemplation of Buddha*), a work translated in the appendix. This is a well-worn method, but one that Proffitt defends, largely because Dōhan was influential by just about every metric. He authored an

impressive number of titles; Proffitt (2023, 174–188) summarizes the contents of twenty-seven "major works." Dōhan interacted with monks at the most important monasteries in Japan. He was well-read in Tendai, Kegon, Hossō, and even Zen traditions. Dōhan was an important figure who has not received enough attention. Proffitt's work gives him the light he deserves.

Proffitt's main thesis rejects the standard view that Dōhan "syncretized" esoteric and pure land Buddhism. The two were not discrete schools or sects that could be combined. Rather, they represented "heterogeneous and mutually informative spheres of inquiry and specializations" (Proffitt 2023, 4). The deep entanglements between esoteric and Pure Land thought and practice significantly predated Dōhan; for this reason, Proffitt (2023, 5) claims, "In Dōhan's time there was nothing really novel about Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism." Instead, "Dōhan exemplifies the general Mahayana tendency toward dialogic engagement" (Proffitt 2023, 290). In other words, since esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land were not truly separate entities to begin with, Dōhan cannot be credited with syncretizing the two traditions. These arguments are important because they counter early modern and modern sectarian impulses to treat schools as closed-off traditions. Moreover, while esoteric Buddhism is often seen as this-worldly, and pure land Buddhism is understood as other-worldly, Proffitt shows how esoteric Buddhism offered techniques for reaching a post-mortem realm that was at once remote and a part of this world. In short, medieval Japanese Buddhism was more fluid than many of our modern assumptions would suggest.

Most of the first half of this book tries to explain why "Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" matters. In these chapters, Proffitt shows that Pure Land ideas have long permeated Mahayana, Tantric, and East Asian Buddhism. I wished that some of the long summaries and analyses of past scholarship used to make these points had been condensed. They read, in some ways, like an extended series of literature reviews on a range of topics such as the definition and origins of Mahayana; the history and historiography of Pure Land Buddhism; debates over the categories of esoteric Buddhism and Tantra in South and East Asia; the early, pre-medieval history of Japanese Buddhism; Kamakura Buddhism and periodization; and so on.

After outlining these various debates and histories over about 130 pages, Proffitt at last turns to Dōhan, providing a biography and overview of his larger corpus for another 150 pages or so. Close to the end of the study, we learn that the main source at the center of Proffitt's monograph is a "relatively minor" work that is "less a reflection of Dōhan's main area of interest as it is of my [Proffitt's] particular (perhaps idiosyncratic) interests" (Proffitt 2023, 197). It seems that scholars still need to wait for another study to cover Dōhan's primary contributions to Japanese Buddhism, something Proffitt admits.

Proffitt's goals are different. Dōhan is more a lens than a biographical subject. Proffitt's (2023, 2) main objective is to "identify a new area of academic inquiry: Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism 密教浄土教."[1] He defines this as "approaches to rebirth in a 'pure land' through the use of various 'esoteric' ritual techniques and doctrinal interpretations derived from the tantras" (Proffitt 2023, 2). In other words, esoteric refers to a set of practices and views that emerged from a specific body of literature originating in South Asia. At times, we encounter other definitions of esoteric as well, including a polemical claim for superiority, spellcraft, a new aspect of Mahayana Buddhism, and a lineage defined by secret initiation. These diverse definitions stem from Proffitt's correct recognition that the sources themselves are multivocal, even cacophonous. Perhaps for this reason, he stresses that the concept of esoteric Buddhism is a "heuristic" or "upāya" (Proffitt 2023, 28, 55, 289, and so on). Like the police officer who arrested my friend, I had hoped for more clarity, but part of the problem is less Proffitt's than the diverse ways that both scholars and primary source materials have used the term esoteric. This book reminds us to embrace the mess and not seek clarity where it cannot be found.

Proffitt's notions of esoteric become clearer, however, when we move out of the numerous surveys and introductions and into his analysis of Dōhan's *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*. For example, Amitābha and his pure land are understood by Dōhan in terms of "the dual mandala system" of the Vajra and Womb realms. Amitābha is further equated with the ever-preaching *dharmakāya* and the body of the practitioner. Dōhan uses technical vocabulary from the esoteric tradition to reinterpret core concepts, such as identifying pure land teachings and practices with the three mysteries and mantra. Proffitt also emphasizes lineage, particularly through Kūkai. To summarize, esoteric pure land Buddhism refers especially to mandalas, mantras, theories of the *dharmakāya* preaching, and lineages that are all associated with Amitābha, his realm, and the practices that enable birth there. These are all concrete ideas that ground Proffitt's study and demonstrate the inseparability of pure land and esoteric teaching and practice.

There are strong reasons to call all of this esoteric, and Proffitt makes a compelling case. At the same time, it is also clear that Dōhan was more than just an esoteric pure land monk. Proffitt points out the strong influence of original enlightenment thought (*hongaku* 本覚) on Dōhan. Dōhan had deep connections

1. It is worth pointing out that this area is not quite as new as it would appear. Proffitt's footnotes and bibliography reveal the Japanese equivalent of the term "esoteric pure land" (*mikkyō jōdokyō* 密教浄土教) in publications beginning in 1979 with similar phrases such as "esoteric pure land thought" (*mikkyō jōdo no shisō* 密教の浄土思想) appearing as early as 1921. Moreover, Proffitt rightly calls attention to Richard Payne, Jacqueline Stone, and George Tanabe as anglophone precedents, scholars who started publishing on the topic from the 1990s. Still, Proffitt offers the most detailed treatment of esoteric pure land Buddhism in English to date.

with early Zen monks, too. This raises the question of whether we are better off seeing Dōhan not as an exemplar of "esoteric Pure Land Buddhism," but rather as a part of "medieval Japanese Pure Land Buddhism," a diverse but unique configuration of ideas and practices related to birth in Amitābha's realm, rooted in thinkers across the entire spectrum of intellectual and sectarian influences. After reading this study, I was left wondering what is gained and lost with the adjective "esoteric." Why privilege this particular framework at the expense of others? Has the hegemony of Kuroda's thesis caused scholars to emphasize esoteric over other equally valid models? Proffitt is surely correct that Pure Land Buddhism was never closed off from other influences; I would just ask that we open the door even further.

Stephan Kigensan Licha's *Esoteric Zen: Zen and the Tantric Teachings in Premodern Japan* also seeks to undermine claims of sectarian purity. As Licha (2023, 6) explains, the vast majority of scholarship on Zen "tends to be framed in a way that isolates it from the broader medieval Buddhist world." Scholars often replicate the Zen tradition's obsession with lineage, telling its history as a diachronic series of internal conversations from one generation of masters to the next, beginning in China and ending in Japan. They have given little attention to how Japanese Zen monks interacted with contemporary figures in Japan outside of Zen lineages. This is a mistake. Medieval Japanese Zen monks were a part of the medieval Japanese Buddhist world. This point seems obvious, but it has generally gone unobserved. Licha's book looks horizontally to uncover how Zen monks interacted with their contemporaries across sects. In my view, this is a superior approach for Zen studies, and I hope more scholars will adopt it moving forward.

Licha interprets esoteric Buddhism as a discourse, using prose peppered with linguistic metaphors. Esoteric Buddhism is a "dialect," an "idiom," a way to "articulate" or "elucidate" Buddhist ideas. It is the way monks read texts, a "hermeneutical attitude or interpretive strategy" (Licha 2023, 17). Like Proffitt, Licha rejects syncretistic approaches that classify esoteric and Zen as distinct entities that were later combined; instead, esoteric logics were the very way through which Zen monks made sense of the world.

Given Licha's interest in linguistic metaphor, I found it fascinating that debates over language also captured the attention of the monks he studies. Much of the first two chapters has comparatively little to do with "esoteric" Zen and instead focuses on "a lively conversation, and often a quarrel," between Enni 円爾 (1202–1280) and the Tendai monk Jōmyō 静明 (d.u.) over the relationship between language and realization. As Licha (2023, 26) explains, Enni needed "to articulate and frame Zen in a Buddhist idiom profoundly different in semantics from the one used in China." These chapters point to the broader argument of the book that Zen monks needed to adapt Chinese texts and teachings to the dominant Japanese (Tendai) intellectual context. In some ways, they show that

Enni promoted Zen within "a discursive space" that was "demarcated and determined by… the emergent original awakening and oral transmission teachings" of medieval Tendai (Licha 2023, 88), ones that, I should stress, were not always esoteric in any discernible way.

The next two chapters get to the literal heart of the matter by exploring how monks translated Zen into a Tantric idiom with particular attention to their conceptualizations of the mind as an eight-petaled lotus-shaped lump of flesh. Chapter 3 continues the book's focus on Enni, who remained "at least metaphorically, in the shadow of the Tendai headquarters of Mt. Hiei," a position that made him feel "the need to articulate Zen's place within a fundamentally tantric world" (Licha 2023, 104). Enni interpreted Zen as an expression of the awakening of Mahāvairocana and latched onto the syllable "*a*" in particular, which, as "both the first syllable of the Indic alphabet, and a negative prefix," was the perfect tool to walk the tightrope between positions that simultaneously claim the emptiness of all signs and the utility of language (Licha 2023, 111). Later thinkers discussed in chapter 4 responded to these questions about the relationship between Zen and esoteric Buddhism in divergent ways. Enni's student, Chikotsu Daie 癡兀大慧 (1229–1312), emphasized Zen's inferiority to and dependency on esoteric Buddhism. In contrast, Kokan Shiren 虎関師錬 (1278–1346) and his successors stressed Zen's superiority and independence with particular emphasis on the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. In doing so, they "no longer depended on their opponent's vocabulary for formulating their self-understanding" (Licha 2023, 132). However, since even Kokan had to respond to the esoteric discursive framework, his efforts too were uniquely Japanese and, in some ways, a part of the esoteric Zen conversation. These chapters, like many of the other studies discussed so far, show a plurality of hierarchical configurations, ones that did not always put esoteric Buddhism in the dominant position. Everyone needed to address esoteric Buddhist discourse, but monks responded in diverse and ever-shifting ways, sometimes asserting the superiority of non-esoteric Buddhism.

The following three chapters look at late medieval and early modern developments with a focus on embryology. These chapters show that esoteric ideas continued to linger within the Zen tradition and were by no means replaced by some sort of authentic or pure Zen in the wake of Kokan. They also expand the discussion into the Sōtō faction, showing how esoteric ideas pervaded diverse corners of Zen. These findings, however, complicate the thesis of the book in ways that warrant further exploration. In particular, Licha notes how Zen monks introduced neo-Confucian cosmologies derived from the *Yijing* 易経 into their embryological analyses. The influence appears to have been vast; Licha (2023, 194–195) argues that "The *Yijing*… provided meta-terms… which could be applied in diverse doctrinal contexts… [it] came to be seen as an alternative, stylishly continental language in which to express Buddhist concepts." It is

telling that the text that Licha (2023, 259) describes as the "perhaps most eloquent testimony to the wide circulation of embryological speculation," the *Sanken icchisho* 三賢一致書 by the Rinzai monk Dairyū 大竜 (d.u.), combines Buddhist, Shinto, and "Confucian" (defined by Licha as "calendric speculation") ideas, drawing particularly from the trigrams of the *Yijing* alongside yin-yang cosmology. For the Sōtō school, monks developed a conceptual framework based on the *Yijing* that was free of tantric elements. These arguments are nuanced and compelling. Still, I wanted Licha to explain how the centrality of neo-Confucianism and the *Yijing* fit his larger argument for esoteric Zen. Does he see all embryological discourse as somehow inherently esoteric? What makes it so? Why not title the book (or at least this third of the book) as "Neo-Confucian Esoteric Zen" or "embryological Zen?" Or, given the first two chapters' emphasis on Tendai, how about calling those "Tendai Zen?" Or, as Licha (2023, 298) ponders in the final pages of the book, why privilege the esoteric as the overarching framework? Couldn't there also be "zenic Esotericism?" These are not trivial questions; they point to and potentially undermine Kuroda's thesis of esoteric superiority.

Licha is aware of these problems. His purported answer is Foucauldian genealogy, though he uses this term idiosyncratically. For Licha, if something is deemed esoteric by "the standards of the recognized community of tantric practitioners," then scholars should adopt the classification of those individuals and their community. In other words, esoteric is whatever the "majority" of esoteric practitioners say it is. To borrow phrasing that Licha himself calls flippant, "if you get away with claiming to be a Zen master, or if another gets away with accusing you of being a *tāntrika* and others replicate such claims… then a Zen master, or a *tantrika* you are" (Licha 2023, 294). To this reviewer, Licha's method in the conclusion, which seems closer to emic analysis, differs from Foucault's notion of genealogy. Foucault's (1977, 147, 161–162) project "fragments what was thought unified," works toward "the systematic dissociation of identity," and claims that "the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation." His very point cautions against accepting the claims of a tradition or the majority and instead stresses the need to uncover the mess of contestation and contingency that troubles assertions of identity. Licha's conclusion is also in conflict with the introduction, which insists that "esoteric Zen is an etic concept" (Licha 2023, 2). If Licha is correct that "esoteric" is more of an idiom or hermeneutic than a collection of components, it remains unclear how we separate an esoteric idiom from an exoteric one and who has the authority to distinguish the two. I left feeling that a genuine Foucauldian genealogy of the category is in order. In some ways, esoteric is a power claim, and we need to interrogate who makes such claims, when, where, and why. Much of Licha's book does this work, but he ends in a different space that perhaps overly privileges insider voices.

These definitional questions and the emphasis on "esoteric" as an overarching framework or hermeneutic point to at least two larger problems facing the field as a whole. The first is about coherence. In a classic and characteristically insightful review essay, Catherine Bell raises a series of questions that emerged from new works on the history of Daoism, a tradition just as nebulous and contested as esoteric Buddhism. As Bell writes,

> [H]ow do we talk about a "tradition" without implying and imposing more coherence and continuity than there actually has been or without ignoring the self-understanding of those who have seen themselves as bearers of a transmitted inheritance? How do we get an appropriate analytic handle on the internal dynamics that create and recreate traditions, the dynamics—simultaneously doctrinal, organizational, and attitudinal—by which people and movements configure their identity, construct their pasts, and determine their alliances and oppositions? When does a self-consciousness about the past together with a set of internal dynamics for interpreting it become a tradition, something that exists as an independent subculture that shapes as much as it is shaped?
>
> Bell (1993, 200)

Scholars of esoteric Buddhism need to answer these same questions. In particular, much of the scholarship discussed above emphasizes fragmentation, debate, and change. Given this interest, we must ask to what degree "esoteric Buddhism" is a coherent category, and what ties it together. Is it an actor's category or a scholarly one? Does this distinction matter? Did esoteric Buddhism mean the same thing at the time of Kūkai as it did in the early modern period? If so, how do we account for such consistency, one that outlasts drastic changes in politics, economics, and culture? If not, has the category itself become too neat, too timeless?

The second problem is about the hegemonic role that esoteric Buddhism has taken in scholarship on medieval Japan. The works discussed above make clear that medieval Buddhist authors incorporated a host of diverse intellectual traditions into their writings, including those derived from original enlightenment thought, kami worship, neo-Confucianism, literary and musicological theory, and other Buddhist schools. The consistent use of "Esoteric" as the modifier in titles like *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* and *Esoteric Zen* repeats Kuroda's assertion that all was subsumed under an esoteric framework. However, the world of medieval Japan was more complex than a unitary esoteric episteme. Esoteric Buddhism was by no means the only discourse in town. I fear that esoteric Buddhism has, in the wake of Kuroda, become a monolithic and all-powerful monster, exerting too much force on our narratives and choice of research topics. Kuroda has forced us to look for the esoteric everywhere; in many ways, this has been helpful. But we have also been trained to find what we seek. This is a dangerous tendency, an intellectual move that once opened up new

pathways but has begun to close them off. What in the archive have we ignored or underappreciated in our search for esotericism? We should be cautious about too quickly asserting esoteric dominance; hierarchies are always fluid and contested. The time has come to seek out other Buddhisms and non-Buddhisms that also defined the medieval age.

The world of medieval Japanese religions was more complex and more integrated than the emphasis on "esoteric" would suggest, and the field has reached a point where the vast benefits of examining esoteric aspects may no longer outweigh what is lost. This is not to criticize any of these books. It is their successes, not their shortcomings, that have led us to a place where it is clear that esoteric discourse and hermeneutics permeated most aspects of medieval Japanese religious life. Future scholars must move the field forward by developing a new understanding of the medieval age that recognizes esoteric Buddhism's centrality without letting it blind us to a more complex religious order.

REFERENCES

Abé, Ryūichi
1999 *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse*. Columbia University Press.

Bell, Catherine
1993 "In Search of the Tao in Taoism: New Questions of Unity and Multiplicity." *History of Religions* 33: 187–201. doi.org/10.1086/463363

Chisan Kangakukai 智山勧学会, ed.
2023 *Kamakura Bukkyō: Mikkyō no shiten kara* 鎌倉仏教—密教の視点から. Daizō Shuppan.

Chou, Yi-liang
1945 "Tantrism in China." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8: 241–332. doi.org/10.2307/2717819

Crosby, Kate
2020 *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia*. Shambhala.

Dolce, Lucia
1999 "Criticism and Appropriation: Nichiren's Attitude toward Esoteric Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26: 349–382. doi.org/bgh8
2011 "Taimitsu: The Esoteric Buddhism of the Tendai School." In *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Richard K. Payne, and Henrik H. Sørensen, 744–767. Brill.

Foucault, Michel
1977 "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice:*

Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, 139–164. Cornell University Press.

Geertz, Clifford
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.

Goble, Geoffrey C.
2019 *Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra, the Ruling Elite, and the Emergence of a Tradition*. Columbia University Press.

Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄
1975 *Nihon chūsei no kokka to shūkyō* 日本中世の国家と宗教. Iwanami Shoten.
1996 "The Development of the *Kenmitsu* System as Japan's Medieval Orthodoxy." Trans. James C. Dobbins. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23: 233–269. doi.org/bgmp

Licha, Stephan Kigensan
2023 *Esoteric Zen: Zen and the Tantric Teachings in Premodern Japan*. Brill.

McBride II, Richard D.
2004 "Is There Really 'Esoteric' Buddhism?" *Journal of the Association of Buddhist Studies* 27: 329–356. doi.org/10.2143/JIABS.27.2.3149626

Orzech, Charles D., Richard K. Payne, and Henrik H. Sørensen
2011 "Introduction: Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia: Some Methodological Considerations." In *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Richard K. Payne, and Henrik H. Sørensen, 1–18. Brill.

Proffitt, Aaron P.
2023 *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Rambelli, Fabio
2013 *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics: Signs, Ontology, and Salvation in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*. Bloomsbury.

Rambelli, Fabio, and Or Porath, eds.
2022 *Rituals of Initiation and Consecration in Premodern Japan: Power and Legitimacy in Kingship, Religion, and the Arts*. De Gruyter.

Sasaki Kaoru 佐々木馨
1997 *Chūsei Bukkyō to Kamakura bakufu* 中世仏教と鎌倉幕府. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

Shinohara, Koichi
2014 *Spells, Images, and Mandalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals*. Columbia University Press.

Wedemeyer, Christian K.
2013 *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. Columbia University Press.