

REVIEW

Nam-lin HUR, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 185. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000. pp. ix, 304. cloth \$40.00, ISBN 0-674-00240-7.

A STUDY OF Asakusa Sensō-ji throughout the Edo period, this volume is a most welcome addition to the growing number of studies in recent years that have approached the study of Japanese religion by exploring how religion is embedded in particular sites. Having visited Sensō-ji often over the years and having always wished I knew more about the place and its history, I found the book to be a delight to read. I especially appreciated Hur's use of diaries, chronicles, and other sources to present a picture of the range of activities occurring at the temple and of the attitudes, desires, and expectations with which people participated in those activities.

Much of the book indeed is devoted to describing and analyzing the culture of "prayer and play" that flourished at Sensō-ji. Drawing on a range of sources, Hur presents a detailed survey of the religious rituals, both Shinto and Buddhist, that were linked with Sensō-ji, its subtemples, and Sensō Shrine. Included here are Tokugawa ancestral rites, annual public rituals for the safety of the nation, rituals responding to disasters such as fires and earthquakes, special rituals conducted for private patrons, *kaichō* or ritual displays of secret images, and the Sanja Matsuri. Hur also explains how these rituals related to and engaged different segments of the population, ranging from shogun to commoner.

Equal attention is given, however, to the culture of play that developed both within the temple compound and in its vicinity. Among the facilities and entertainers to be found were teahouses, circus shows, *misemono* (freak shows), archery booths, vendor stalls, tooth pick shops, periodic markets and fairs, storytellers, and street performers of various sorts. Prostitution in a variety of forms was also part of what was offered. The pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara were not far removed from Sensō-ji, and Hur describes the two as forming "a sort of liberated zone" (p. 98). While the prostitution of Yoshiwara was licensed, unlicensed forms appeared outside its bounds in places such as teahouses and archery booths. By the middle of the Tokugawa period, Sensō-ji had become one of the major *sakariba* (amusement areas) within Edo.

A major portion of Hur's argument is devoted to showing that the cultures of prayer and play, which at least some people might be prone to view as forming two distinct domains, form a unity. The nature of this unity is formulated in a variety of ways ("a natural... union," "the built-in unity," "perfect harmony," pp. 28, 72, 84) but it is always strongly formulated. To explain the existence of this unity, Hur traces it to Japanese notions of *asobi* or play in which religious ritual and what some might view today as play or entertainment were deeply linked (p. 82).

Hur does not present us a static picture of life at Sensō-ji but rather tells the story of the rise of the culture of play and prayer throughout the Edo period. To do so, Hur examines demographic changes in Edo, shifts in the

segments of the population patronizing the temple, the changing sources of the temple's income, and efforts by government officials to oppose the unity of prayer and play. Commoners came to replace debt-ridden samurai as the primary patrons of the temple, and the range of business and entertainment activities surrounding the temple came to offer job opportunities for the newly emerging urban lower classes. The culture of prayer and play became a center for new religious and cultural activities, some of which at least implicitly critiqued aspects of the Tokugawa system. Hur also treats how Confucianists and government officials viewed this unity of prayer and play as degenerate and attempted to oppose it. In this story, the officials of Sensō-ji and commoners prevail by refusing to be reigned in by the efforts of government officials to control them. Hur sees his story as debunking an alternative story, "the myth of 'degenerate Buddhism'," which he sees as ultimately deriving from the historiography promoted by the Tokugawa ruling elite (p. 29).

Given the scope of this book, it is not surprising that portions of the argument are not without problems. While different reviewers will no doubt have questions to raise about different aspects of the book, I will limit my comments and questions here to the argument made for the unity of prayer and play. I must admit, first of all, to being a bit suspicious of any analysis of a culture, religion, or religious community that posits an unproblematic unity of any sort. I find it difficult to imagine a mode of human existence not marked by tensions, contradictions, and incongruities. Much of the evidence Hur presents, indeed, seems to point to something quite different from a simple, unproblematic unity of prayer and play.

As noted, one major aspect of the unity of prayer and play was prostitution. Hur links prostitution to religion by noting the existence of a tradition of sacred prostitution in ancient times, forms of prostitution practiced by women who were semi-religious figures in medieval times, the linkage of prostitution with pilgrimage sites, and the use of a quasi-religious nomenclature for professional prostitutes in later times. He concludes that "the Sensō-ji prostitutes belonged to the Japanese religious tradition associated with play" (p. 89). Unity seems to be stressed here to the point of not allowing for the possibility of Japanese, whatever they may have called prostitutes, to have perceived some degree of tension, incongruity, or contradiction in the association of Buddhism and prostitution. Hur's celebration of the culture of prayer and play at times also seems to downplay the reality that the "liberated zone" was constituted in large part by indentured, sexual servitude. It was, in short, a zone where more men than women seem to have been liberated.

As evidence that Edoites saw this "liberated zone" as a unity and did not differentiate between the pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara and the religious precincts of Sensō-ji, Hur cites a number of *senryū* (p. 98):

Entering Kaminari [Gate], [one] passes through [to Yoshiwara] like
kaminari (lightning).

Dangling to [Asakusa] Kannon, [Yoshiwara] stands out conspicuous.

What fun to fool around [Asakusa] Kannon on the way [to Yoshiwara].

[Asakusa] Kannon is a Buddha who is of long-lasting use [for Yoshiwara].

Inside the venerable [Sensō-ji] temple, [one] cuts a crossroads [to Yoshiwara].

Most if not all of these *senryū*, I think, might be very plausibly read as indicating quite the opposite of what Hur seems to see in them. Rather than pointing to the undifferentiated unity of Yoshiwara and Sensō-ji, these *senryū* seem to play on the incongruity of the association of Buddhism and prostitution. Most startling for me was Hur's analysis of a Sensō-ji legend as summing up "the unity of prayer and play in Japanese culture" (p. 89).

A daughter lived in a house (*hitotsuya*) in Asakusa with her parents, and the parents had their daughter sleep with travelers. The parents killed the travelers while they slept on stone pillows (*ishimakura*), by knocking their heads against the stone pillows, and they then stole their possessions in order to make a living. One day, the daughter deeply repented her sins and disguised herself in male attire before sleeping with a traveler. The next morning the parents awoke to find they had killed their own daughter and, in remorse, begged Asakusa Kannon's mercy. (p. 89)

Relying on the work of Yanagita Kunio, Hur suggests that the prostitute in this tale was originally a female shaman and that the tale thus "alludes to the cultural unity of prayer and play" (p. 90). In this analysis, the tale thus shifts from summing up to alluding to the unity of prayer and play.

Hur returns to this story at a later point in the argument and takes it as emblematic of the unity of prayer and play. He first notes, however, that Sensō-ji was close not just to the pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara but also to residential quarters for outcasts, execution grounds, and a cremation center. The general area of Sensō-ji was a liminal world

where religion and entertainment were fused and the social evils and defilement emanating from the inner city were dissolved. Religious quests were fulfilled at Sensō-ji, sexual energies were absorbed at Yoshiwara, death pollution was handled by outcasts at Kotsukappara, and social evils and criminals were terminated at the execution sites. When all of these elements are taken into account, the sociocultural geography of Sensō-ji points to an inherent association of prayer and play. (p. 103)

It seems to be at least implied, though unexplained here, that executions and the handling of corpses by outcasts have somehow joined the unity of prayer and play.

The *hitotsuya* story, Hur then argues, suggests that Sensō-ji was not just a place where prayer and play mingled, but also a place "where both killing and repentance were encompassed by the mercy of Asakusa Kannon" (p. 103). Hur reminds us here that we must not overlook the role of the parents in the *hitotsuya* story; it was they and not the daughter who killed the travelers. "In this sense, the parents may be seen as symbolizing the institution of

the *hitotsuya*, in which religion and entertainment merged into a business enterprise. Here we see the institutional unity of prayer and play" (p. 104).

Finding it difficult both to identify and follow this argument that the *hitotsuya* story somehow sums up "the unity of prayer and play in Japanese culture" (p. 89), I have reconstructed three possible arguments. One argument may be suggesting that the story can illustrate the unity of prayer and play if we accept that a possible allusion to an earlier shamanic role for the young woman somehow allows us to see her being involved in "prayer." Her activities as a prostitute presumably count as her involvement in "play." If we accept this reading, then we have a rather odd summation of the unity of prayer and play: 1) a religious function only alluded to, 2) prostitution, and 3) murder.

Perhaps, however, Hur is reading both the young woman's and then her parents' repentance and turning to Kannon as the "prayer" aspect of the story. If so, this repentance seems to reject the "play" (i.e., prostitution) dimension of the story and thus the unity of prayer and play. A third possibility is that Hur is reading the story in light of his conclusion that Sensō-ji was a place where "both killing and repentance were encompassed by the mercy of Asakusa Kannon" (p. 89). While the story clearly includes both killing and repentance, it is still unclear how the story illustrates the unity of prayer and play unless these categories have been expanded to include executions and murder.

If the story is to be related to the theme of the unity of prayer and play, it seems to me much simpler, and more plausible, to read the story as a rejection of that unity. In their act of repentance and move towards Kannon (prayer), the young woman and her parents reject prostitution (play) as well as murder. Similar problems concerning the argument for unity arise throughout the book. Like the Tokugawa bakufu, Hur seems at times so preoccupied with orderliness and unity that tensions, contradictions, incongruities, and the possibility of multiple and conflicting mappings of sacred space are suppressed.

While some of the materials Hur has presented are open to alternative readings and interpretations, the project he has embarked on is an interesting and important one. Though focused on Sensō-ji, Hur attempts to understand the temple by placing it in the context of the range of sacred places and sites constituting Edo. In addition, Hur concentrates not just on the symbolic dimension of such sacred sites but also on how they are bound up with social, political, and economic concerns, systems, and tensions. Hur has offered us, in other words, a valuable first step in an effort to map "the larger cosmological design of Edo" (p. 102).

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