

Mortuary Practices, Buddhism, and Family Relations in Japanese Society

Nam-lin Hur, University of British Columbia

Mark Rowe. *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$91 (cloth), \$29 (paper).

Satsuki Kawano. *Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010. 232 pp. \$47 (cloth), \$27 (paper).

In *Bonds of the Dead*, Mark Rowe, who focuses on “the grave as the center of the ancestral orbit” in Japanese mortuary practices, observes that, due to the gradual loss of its gravitational pull, “the economic and social bedrock of temple Buddhism in Japan has eroded to the point where even its continued existence is publicly called into question” (222). Here, Rowe speaks to the decline of what is commonly known as the *danka* system. In contrast, in *Nature's Embrace*, Satsuki Kawano finds that the dominance of Buddhist death-related rituals couched in the tradition of the *danka* system remains by and large intact.

Whether the *danka* system is in decline or not, both Rowe and Kawano agree that in understanding the religious texture of mortuary and memorial practices in Japanese society today, it is essential to acknowledge enduring Buddhist death customs from the Meiji to the present—customs that are deeply rooted in the legacies of the *danka* system. Like many scholars before him, Rowe renders the *danka* system in English as “the temple parishioner system” (3). In my work on the *danka* system, I have suggested that an English rendering that includes the word “parishioner” or “parish” is misleading, for it connotes a geographical zoning or territorial unit in the affiliation between patron families and funerary temples. In fact, the *danka* system simply denotes the affiliation between patron families and funerary Buddhist temples. Most commonly,

patterns of affiliation between family and temple are so crisscrossed that it is almost impossible to group them into territorial units (Hur 2007, 121–124).

In the Meiji period, the *danka* system lost the legal or semi-legal clout it had enjoyed in the previous period. A new family registration law that did not assume anti-Christian certification by Buddhist temples of all residents was introduced. Nevertheless, Buddhist mortuary and memorial rites weathered the anti-Buddhist climate of early Meiji and eventually regained their previous vigor. Although the legality of the temple certification system, which had helped cement the *danka* system, was rescinded in early Meiji, the conventional customs of the *danka* system were fully utilized by the Meiji government, which, in 1884, “established a series of laws concerning burial and graves, setting national standards for the definition of a grave and regulating disposal” (Kawano, 59); these laws worked more favorably for Buddhist death. In particular, the Meiji policy had decisive influence over what a grave should be, how it should be cared for, and to whom it should be passed on. All this reinvigorated the Buddhist family-grave system.

In examining the legacies of Meiji policies on family graves in contemporary Japan, Rowe and Kawano diverge. Rowe examines how the new modes of graves that stray from the conventional customs reflect, and are projected onto, the evolution of Japanese Buddhism. On the other hand, Kawano explores what is behind the new modes of graves in today’s Japanese society with a focus on the shift in family system. Nonetheless, both authors seem to agree that new modes of graves are a critical indicator of the sociocultural changes embraced by Japan in recent years.

Rowe examines the implications of a new type of grave by analyzing the changing relationship between the force of money and the Buddhist temples. He explains that, “from 1946 onwards, the government forced absentee landlords to sell their land back to farmers” (26). Because of this policy, temples, which were mostly absentee landlords, were impoverished. As an important source of income (land) was removed, Buddhist temples scrambled to solidify what still remained. Rowe notes that “the most significant result of the land reforms was the increased dependence by temples on revenue from temple graves, funerals, and memorial rites” (29), which further pushed temples to be “complicit in the commercialization of death” (223).

In comparison, Kawano explores what the stem-family system, a hallmark of Japanese society, has to do with the emergence of a new type of grave. Despite ongoing structural changes

since the Meiji period that resulted in population growth, urbanization, and increased mobility, argues Kawano, the stem-family system and the social values that underlie it have not changed much. Ritual care for the dead has “consistently rested in the hands of the family” (48) in the tradition of the stem-family system. In this connection, Kawano pursues how the stem-family system is reconciled with new types of graves.

What has caused these new types of graves to emerge? Rowe alludes to a possible explanation: “The wretched image of a temple graveyard overrun with weeds that both reminds us of the central place of death and burial to the continued existence of Japanese temples and hints at a potentially bleak future for Buddhist sects” (20). In tracing the trajectory of new graves, Rowe highlights the image of *muenbotoke*, or “abandoned dead, who no longer receive visits from living descendants” (46). *Muen* denotes the absence of bonds, and *muenbotoke* refers to abandoned graves. Rowe then relates the loss of bonds to the economic state of temple Buddhism: “The problem of *muen* is also a financial one. For temples, particularly in urban areas where space is limited, abandoned graves mean lost revenue” (47).

Kawano also pays attention to the phenomenon of abandoned dead on the rise in Japanese society: “Those who die without family are cremated and buried in a grave for homeless souls (*muenbaka*) in a municipal cemetery” (50)—one that is, in Rowe’s words, “nothing more than a ‘garbage dump for bones’” (100). Some Buddhist temple priests volunteer to conduct death rituals for such homeless souls. Occasionally, religious institutions, communities, and families may hold ceremonies to console these spirits so that they will not harm the living. According to Kawano, however, Japanese society is embracing “a dramatic reduction of memorial-care resources to continue conventional ancestor veneration at a family grave” (5). It seems that the search for alternative mortuary care is encouraged from all sides.

Two types of new graves stand out in Japan. One type is the eternal memorial grave (*eitai kuyōbo*) that began to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most prominently, Myōkōji in Niigata offers a type of eternal memorial grave called the Annon (“peace and tranquility”), and Tōchōji in Tokyo has its own memorial grave for members of its En no Kai Society. In both cases, those who purchase an eternal memorial grave are not required to become a member of the temple’s sect; the process is “based on individual membership rather than formal parishioner status in his[/her] temple” (14). Rowe explains how the eternal memorial grave system at Tōchōji works: “En no Kai members pay a one-time fee of eight hundred thousand yen, or

roughly one-fifth the cost of a regular grave. Unlike traditional grave costs, this price includes the interment ceremony, yearly memorial rites, and space for one's cremated remains for up to thirty-three years, the length of time for which individuals are traditionally memorialized before becoming anonymous ancestors. At the end of this period, the remains are moved to a communal ossuary in the two-story pagoda near the main gate" (115). Rowe offers a detailed discussion of eternal memorial graves operated by Myōkōji and Tōchōji.

The scattering of ashes represents another type of new funerary practice in Japan. This type of new funerary practice—to which Kawano devotes her whole discussion while Rowe allocates only one chapter for it in his book—has been promoted by the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS) since 1991 under the slogan “freedom from a grave.” As Kawano explains, this form of new grave, which does not involve a fixed, permanent family grave and memorial site and celebrates “deceased-centeredness,” offers “a choice that reduces the investment of a family's wealth in memorial assets and a caregiver's burden in the future” (51). Kawano adds: “The deceased's desire to return to nature and the survivors' final parting with the deceased are the two central themes that characterize scattering ceremonies” (138).

Whether interment in nonfamily graves with permanent ritual care or scattering ashes is chosen, these two new types of mortuary practices neither require a conventional affiliation with a temple nor presuppose the continuity of the stem family, at least in theory. As a result, they pose a challenge to the continued existence of Japanese temple Buddhism, as described by Rowe, or produce new implications for family relations, as described by Kawano. For these reasons, Rowe explores how the new funerary practices affect the ways in which the *danka* system is operated, and Kawano examines how those who choose ash scattering reshape patterns of social relations within families and communities.

In identifying what has caused new funerary practices to emerge, both authors share common views on the demographic, social, and economic changes of postwar Japan in relation to the economy of death rituals and memorial services that has sustained Buddhist temples and funerary industry, but they derive different conclusions. In Rowe's assessment, these mortuary ritual changes have dampened the economy of the *danka* system, which hitherto secured income for temples through the sale of grave sites, the collection of fees related to funerary services, and donations by funerary patrons. However, for Kawano, who does not pay much attention to the changing mode of Buddhist institutions, the practices of ash scattering do not necessarily have

much negative impact on the conventional family system of Japan. She contends that “new mortuary strategies, particularly the scattering of ashes, developed partly because stem-family-based patterns of inheriting ceremonial assets persist in urban settings” (140). In short, Rowe finds that the fundamentals of Japan’s temple Buddhism are shaken by the emergence of new funerary practices. In comparison, Kawano finds that the fundamentals of Japan’s stem-family system still remain strong, if modified to some extent, despite new mortuary challenges.

Thus, the two authors stress different conclusions. For Rowe, new funerary practices inform the problems Buddhist temples are facing in Japanese society. Buddhist temples increasingly depend on funerary income and this further generates a negative image of funerary Buddhism. Mortuary practices have been more commercialized and stultified. In this spiraling process, the role of Buddhist doctrine in mortuary practice is becoming more obscure and the religious meanings of funerals are easily lost. Some priests even feel that they are “like actors on a stage or like ‘chess pieces’ for the funeral companies” (38). All this has given rise to dilemmas that have spurred a variety of reactions, ranging “from debates over the relationship between ‘true’ Buddhism and folk beliefs, to concerns over the dissonance between the training of priests and the day-to-day work of local temples, and to irritation over institutional gaps between sectarian elites and local priests” (179).

Based on his analysis, Rowe suggests that new types of funerals, which offer options of choice limited to one generation, can save a *danka* from a set of multigenerational financial obligations owed to the temple. Not surprisingly, some Buddhists in Japan try to wrestle with the trend of non-Buddhist funeral options and the increasing criticism of its continuing empty mortuary services that benefit “no one but the priests themselves” (228). In particular, influenced by Western philological, philosophical, and religious studies, “questions regarding the meaning of Buddhist funerary rites, [and] the role of Buddhism in contemporary Japanese society” (217–218) are on the rise within as well as without. From the standpoint that “contemporary Japanese Buddhism is best understood in terms of how it attends to the dead” (230), Rowe sees a post-*danka* era emerging in Japanese society.

For Kawano, despite ample signs of revolt against the *danka* system, new funerary practices have not yet made much difference: “Although ash scatterers promote self-reliance and more control over their own mortuary practices, they do not always proclaim the rights of an isolated individual or adopt an egocentric theory of personhood” (23). Nor has the traditional

stem-family system been replaced with a nuclear-family system which, in the views of some scholars, fits better the reality of current Japanese society and presents a fertile source of new mortuary practices. Despite the fact that the New Civil Code endorsed an equal-inheritance policy among siblings, the family grave in today's Japan is still predominantly inherited by only one child, usually the eldest son.

Kawano rejects the historical-transitional thesis that is designed to explain changes found in mortuary and memorial practices in relation to Japan's alleged postwar shift from the stem-family system to the nuclear-family system. Her counterarguments, which are convincing, are based on a cohort analysis that suggests that the scattering of ashes is "a coping strategy" (147) adopted mainly by those belonging to a group of persons born between 1925 and 1950. These cohorts show high birthrates and low mortality rates. This group of people, which Kawano classifies as the second-generational cohorts (distinct from the first ones, born before 1925, and the third ones, born after 1950), have many adult siblings, and among them, only one eventually lives with his aging parents and inherits or establishes a family grave to venerate them, thereby preserving the tradition of the stem-family system. The other siblings (in Kawano's words, "spare" children) and their spouses are the main practitioners of ash scattering. In other words, ash scattering is a by-product of the arrangement that "spare" children make within the cultural orbit of the stem-family system—an arrangement in which key principles allocating memorial care in the stem-family framework are preserved or reconstituted in Japan's postindustrial society. Kawano concludes: "The majority of ash scatterers follow common rules of care-resource allocation that often expect only one married son to inherit a ceremonial asset" (151).

Thus, the conclusions drawn from these two inspiring books run against each another. Shedding light on the problem of *muen* that has pushed for "innovative burial system in the face of new social realities" (71), Rowe states: "In a sense scattering solves the problem of *muen*, not simply by reducing the load on overburdened urban graveyards or redefining traditional bonds, but rather by providing the deceased with an alternative to the ancestral cycle, that of nature" (177). Of course, Rowe admits that ash scattering accounts for only a small number of burials each year, but he is convinced that "it embodies a highly visible and keenly felt affront to Buddhism's monopoly over mortuary rites in Japan" (227). Simply put, for Rowe, new mortuary practices "potentially represent the first signs of a post-*danka* Japanese Buddhism" (45).

For Kawano, there have been few changes in the persistent tradition of a stem-family-based framework of memorial-care allocation. Kawano assures us that “scattering is not necessarily replacing the traditional family-grave system” (142). As far as she is concerned, the allocation of ceremonial duties and assets in a stem-family framework is still common and dominant in postwar Japan. In a nutshell, the new mortuary practices, represented by ash scattering, are by and large a passing phenomenon adopted by the generational cohorts born between 1925 and 1950 who are caught in the trap of high birthrates and low mortality rates—a trap that has produced “spare” children.

Where do these diverging observations come from? Rowe seems to turn around against the center of the forest and zoom in on some trees on the periphery; Kawano seems to focus on some trees along the periphery although she stands facing the forest. The point is that if both authors had explored the main forest (the tradition of the *danka* system) in a more direct manner, their portrayal of it would have been not so divergent. In another words, Rowe and Kawano both miss the forest for the trees, but each focuses on a different set of trees (a different disciplinary approach).

In the beginning of his book Rowe notes that “in Japan, 90 percent of all funerals are Buddhist, and the majority of all temples derive their primary income from maintaining graves and providing mortuary services for parishioners” (3). Similarly, Kawano observes that, in postindustrial Japanese society, “the mainstream option is to build a family grave as a house after death for a small, urban family in a suburban cemetery” (179). By taking up some examples found in the 10 percent minority, one can still explore the contours of the remaining 90 percent majority. Ash scattering is really a minority of the minority in the business of mortuary care, and it still offers a convenient cut that can be related to the whole of Japanese mortuary practices. However, one might argue that these peripheral strategies cannot be a match for a head-on exploration of the majority chunk of funerary Buddhism. How do the legacies of the *danka* system or the traditional customs of Buddhist funerary and memorial rites fare in contemporary Japanese society? This big question will continue to puzzle us as long as it is not directly tackled. There must be ways of examining the inner dynamics of the *danka* system without resorting to a detour through the periphery. Has Japanese society entered the post-*danka* era? No one is sure yet.

Despite their differences in methodology and research interests, both authors remind us of the usefulness of interdisciplinary approaches that, when combined, offer complementary understanding. From Rowe's book, we learn a lot about the current status of Japanese Buddhism. Kawano offers an in-depth ethnographic analysis of seemingly shifting yet stable family relations in Japanese society. Her analysis, which is grounded in sociology and anthropology, offers what scholars of religious or Buddhist studies are often not fully geared to offer. It would be interesting to see what anthropologists might say about Rowe's thesis that "the fear of *muen* for one's ancestors and for oneself is the driving force behind the development and acceptance of new graves" (224). One might wonder how religious studies or Buddhist studies scholars would evaluate Kawano's suggestion that "the sense of self-sufficiency and control expressed by ash scatterers should not be confused with adoption of the idea of the autonomous individual or Western-style individualism" (171). We still wait for a synthetic multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary inquiry regarding funerary Buddhism and mortuary practices in Japanese society.

Nam-lin Hur is professor of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia.

References

Nam-lin Hur. 2007. *Death and Social Order: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.