

BOOK REVIEWS

Genshin's Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Japan. By Robert F. Rhodes. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 404 pages. Paperback: ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-7928-0.

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The *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 is one of the most important books in the history of Japanese Buddhism, not only due to the breadth and depth of its content, but because of its impact and influence on Japanese religion in practice. Rhodes's study is a must read for scholars of Japanese religion, but also scholars and practitioners of Buddhism broadly, as well as those interested in the comparative study of soteriological systems. Indeed, many treatises were written by the Buddhist scholiasts of Mt. Hiei 比叡 and other major monastic centers, but most of those erudite works remained on the mountain, as it were. The *Ōjōyōshū* was actually read and used to inform Buddhist practice, and its author, Genshin 源信 (942–1017), apparently served as the model for a virtuous monk that appears in the *Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel and arguably the most important work of Japanese literature. One of the most important contributions of this study is its sustained engagement with Genshin in his own intellectual context. The study of Genshin is generally conducted from the perspective of contemporary understandings of his teachings with centuries of doctrinal precedence for how Genshin ought to be understood. Rhodes explicitly addresses the shortcomings of that approach, and other important issues, so as to contextualize Genshin's thought in the broader context of the development of Mahayana thought as well as the particular context of the unique Japanese approach to the Pure Land tradition.

It is amazing that so little work has been done in English on Genshin or the *Ōjōyōshū*. Rhodes's study is therefore groundbreaking, as it opens this text, the eventful life, and scholastic career of its author Genshin to a wider audience. Genshin was a prolific scholar of multiple areas of Buddhist study including Tendai 天台 Mahayana Buddhist studies, itself a comprehensive approach to Buddhist meditation and doctrine, and classical areas of Buddhist study such as logic and Abhidharma. Therefore, this study of Genshin will be of interest to scholars of Buddhism more broadly. Perhaps one reason so little work has been done on Genshin is because of the general

disinterest Anglophone scholars have shown for Pure Land Buddhism, both as a generalized aspect of Mahayana Buddhism as well as a particular form of Japanese Buddhism. Sadly, it appears that many scholars and contemporary Buddhist practitioners labor under the misperception that Pure Land Buddhism is a niche esoteric interest, a Galapagos phenomenon relegated to the Japanese archipelago. However, in recent years, thanks especially to the Pure Land Buddhist Studies Series through the University of Hawai'i Press and Institute of Buddhist Studies, which published the work under consideration, more books on the dynamic diversity of Pure Land traditions across the Mahayana world are beginning to appear in English. In Japan today, Pure Land Buddhism is the largest form of Buddhism in practice, and to a large degree, this could be said of East Asia and North and South America as well. As Genshin was a central figure whose work was instrumental in the creation of the Pure Land discourse upon which generations of Buddhist thinkers continued to draw, this study of Genshin should garner a significant readership.

The work under consideration is comprised of three subdivisions with eleven chapters. Below I will provide a brief description of some of the major themes in each chapter.

In chapter 1, "The Indian and Chinese Background," Rhodes explores the Indian and Chinese precedents upon which Genshin draws. Of particular importance is Rhodes's emphasis on Pure Land cosmology and soteriology as a generalized dimension of Mahayana Buddhism broadly conceived, and the popularity of Sukhāvātī and the Buddha Amitābha (Jp. Amida 阿弥陀) across genres of Mahayana sutra literature and ritual texts. As a catholic Mahayana Buddhist thinker, Genshin draws upon the breadth of his inherited tradition to compose his essentials for Pure Land rebirth. Rhodes examines some of the major sutras associated with Amitābha Buddha and the Pure Land, including versions of the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra* and the *Contemplation Sutra*, as well as the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sutra*. Following this initial section, Rhodes considers in some detail the works of Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597) and the place of Amitābha Buddha in the Tiantai 天台 system. In particular, Rhodes emphasizes that for Zhiyi, in general, Amitābha Buddha is primarily employed as an object of meditation leading to the realization of the fundamental truths of the comprehensive Tiantai meditation and doctrinal system. Rhodes also considers the importance of Tanluan 曇鸞 (ca. 476–542), Daochuo 道綽 (562–645), and Shandao 善導 (613–681), who may be regarded as pioneers in the devotional Pure Land stream that influenced the later Tiantai, and then Japanese Tendai, traditions, as well the whole of East Asian Buddhism. Rhodes addresses changes within Tang 唐 China whereby Amitābha Buddha emerges not simply as one Buddha among many but as a primary object of devotion, and his Pure Land not simply one Pure Land among many but as a highly sought-after postmortem soteriological goal in its own right. Finally, Rhodes empha-

sizes that within the Japanese Tendai system upon which Genshin drew, both philosophical and devotional approaches to Amitābha Buddha and the Pure Land flourished and functioned together.

In chapter 2, “The Introduction of Pure Land Buddhism to Japan,” Rhodes begins to chart how the Pure Land emerged as a site for soteriological aspiration in early Japan. Initially, Sukhāvātī functioned alongside Tuṣita heaven, and indigenous and Daoist views of the afterlife, and seems to have remained a generalized goal, rather than a specific goal, for religious practice, and in this environment, merit making and merit dedication provided the context for how Buddhists thought about the Pure Land. In other words, rather than individuals aspiring to be reborn in Sukhāvātī, temples functioned at first as places where elite Buddhists cultivated and dedicated merit for the auspicious rebirth of their ancestors (p. 43). However, over time, Buddhist scholiasts who studied the Pure Land teachings began to regard the Pure Land path as an avenue by which ordinary beings may also attain liberation.

In chapter 3, “The Growth of Pure Land Buddhism in the Heian Period,” Rhodes begins to sketch out how Mt. Hiei grew as a major center for esoteric Buddhist ritual praxis and Pure Land soteriology. Japanese Tendai is in some sense grounded in a dual curriculum, with the works of Zhiyi on the one hand, and esoteric Buddhism on the other, both of which have their own non-dualist ways of approaching the Pure Land. Fundamental to Zhiyi’s meditative system is the constant walking samadhi, which is based on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sutra*, an important Prajñāpāramitā Pure Land text that promotes contemplation of the Buddha Amitābha and the recitation of the *nenbutsu* 念佛. The constant walking samadhi was an important form of practice on Mt. Hiei, and this practice spread widely throughout mountain monastic centers in Japan and greatly influenced lineages of ascetic mountain-based practitioners. In addition, Tendai lineages also emphasized the practice of esoteric Buddhist ritual. Not only does the Buddha Amitābha appear in both of the mandalas associated with the esoteric tradition, the Womb Realm, and Vajra Realm, Mandalas, but also many of the *dhāraṇī* and mantra ritual texts promote the aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land Sukhāvātī. One of the strengths of this study is the degree to which Rhodes emphasizes the ways in which so-called esoteric and Pure Land practices functioned together as part of a broader ritual regime. It is often the case that scholars of Pure Land Buddhism all but ignore esoteric Buddhism, often presenting it as that thing against which Pure Land Buddhism emerged, and scholars of esoteric Buddhism often deemphasize the role that Pure Land Buddhism has played as a site for esoteric praxis and soteriological aspiration. Rhodes’s close attention to monks such as Ennin 圓仁 (794–864), who purportedly passed away while performing mudra and mantra while his students recited the *nenbutsu*, is important as this event came to be held up as an exemplar for later deathbed practices (p. 57). Similarly, Rhodes examines the career of monks

such as Kūya 空也 (903–972) who promoted Pure Land practice at both high and low levels, within official and non-official spheres of Buddhist activity (pp. 64–72). Rhodes emphasizes the point that even though Kūya promoted the cultivation of the Pure Land path as a form of individual salvation, he did not promote it in a way that was exclusive of other forms of Buddhism. Rather, not unlike Genshin, Kūya understood the Pure Land path to function within the broader ritual regime that included esoteric Buddhism, generalized thaumaturgical rites, and the study of various sutras.

In chapter 4, “Zenyū, Senkan, and the Beginning of Tendai Pure Land Discourse,” Rhodes explores the development of Tendai Pure Land thought in greater detail, focusing on the careers of Zenyū 禪瑜 (913–990) and Senkan 千觀 (918–984). Zenyū was active at the same time as Kūya and composed treatises on the Pure Land from the perspective of a Tendai scholiast, drawing upon teachings found in the *Lotus Sutra* to provide further justification for dedicated Pure Land practice. Zenyū emphasized the point that ordinary beings can in fact achieve rebirth in the Pure Land through the recitation of the *nenbutsu*. The *nenbutsu*, Zenyū contends, is inherently efficacious because of the great power of the vows of Amitābha (pp. 79–82). These two points were central to Genshin’s later approach to Pure Land thought. The bulk of this chapter concerns the career of Senkan, a contemporary of Zenyū, who was primarily associated with Onjōji 園城寺, a major site for esoteric Buddhist practice. Senkan was revered for his debate skills and erudition as a monk well versed in esoteric ritual and exoteric doctrinal studies. However, it seems Senkan grew disenchanted with the political nature of the Buddhism of his day, a sentiment we see mirrored in Genshin’s career. While in retreat, Senkan continued to refine his views on the Pure Land path, which Rhodes explores in some detail. In his writings, Senkan emphasized the importance and universality of the aspiration for enlightenment for all beings. In other words, while the rigorous practices of a bodhisattva or monk may not be accessible for all beings, aspiring to become a Buddha is possible even for those who may find it difficult to pursue rigorous practices in this life (pp. 94–95).

With this chapter Rhodes concludes part one of his study, and closes with a brief summary of the key points found in part one. In particular, he stresses that in India, China, and in early Japanese Buddhism, following the Pure Land path did not constitute a rejection of other modes of Buddhist practice, and aspiring for rebirth in Sukhāvātī was one goal along the bodhisattva path to buddhahood (p. 104).

In chapter 5, “Genshin’s Early Years,” Rhodes situates Genshin in the context of the rapid ascent of Mt. Hiei to becoming one of the most powerful Buddhist institutions in Japan. Genshin was early on well positioned to ascend the ranks of this political and religious powerhouse. First, Genshin was already established as a widely respected scholar in several areas of Buddhist study. Second, Genshin was the student of Ryōgen 良源 (912–985), the mastermind behind Mt. Hiei’s ascent to power. Certainly, it

seems like Genshin could have followed in his teacher's footsteps. Instead, he chose to become a recluse at Yokawa 横川. As Rhodes notes, Genshin did not leave a record explaining his decision, so scholars have had to speculate (p. 121). It seems possible that Genshin left the center of power in response to the increasingly violent factionalism, sectarianism, and aristocratization of the sangha, as Ryōgen continued to consolidate power and influence through his relationships with powerful aristocratic families.

In chapter 6, "Genshin and Pure Land Buddhism," Rhodes contextualizes the *Ōjōyōshū* within Genshin's broader perspective on the Pure Land path, and discusses in some detail Genshin's participation in the *Nijūgo zanmaie* 二十五三昧会, an important Pure Land fellowship. Rhodes notes that though Genshin does not deny the efficacy of the various *kenmitsu* 顕密 practices for full-time monastics who were particularly gifted, he recognizes that those practices are simply unattainable for most people, and therefore, it is essential to fully explain the alternative Pure Land path to meet the needs of people in the latter days of the Dharma (pp. 131–32).

Rhodes also provides a very useful summary of the chapters of the *Ōjōyōshū* (pp. 132–41). In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 1, "Loathing the Defiled Realm," Genshin examines the hells and the various afflictions experienced by beings in the six realms. Based on the predicament beings find themselves in, Genshin promotes the Pure Land path as the only path whereby most sentient beings may attain Buddhahood in the present age. Readers who do not already know this may be delighted to learn that Rhodes is nearing completion of his translation of the *Ōjōyōshū*, which has never been fully translated into English. I predict that this particular chapter will prove to be a favorite among professors teaching classes on Buddhism, art history, or religious studies because here Genshin draws upon classical Buddhist works dealing with traditional cosmology, and explains in exquisitely graphic detail the diverse torments of the various hells. Genshin would make Dante blush, and in my experience, undergraduate students love learning about the hells!

In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 2, "Seeking the Pure Land," Genshin explains the various delights beings may enjoy in the Pure Land, while also emphasizing that birth in the Pure Land is not an eternal paradise, but a step along the bodhisattva's path to Buddhahood. In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 3, "Proofs for the Land of Supreme Bliss," Genshin argues for the superiority of Amitābha Buddha as an object of devotion.

In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 4, "Proper Practice of the Nenbutsu," and chapter 5, "Aids to Nenbutsu," Genshin examines the theory and practice of *nenbutsu*, which he regards as the central practice of the Pure Land path. Due to the emphasis placed on the recitative *nenbutsu* by later traditions, Rhodes emphasizes that for Genshin, *nenbutsu* was not so narrowly defined. Rather, recitative *nenbutsu* is contextualized in the five gates of mindfulness, veneration, praise, vow, contemplation, and merit transferences (p. 134), and may be aided by such practices as generating *bodhicitta*, faith, vows, and so on

(p. 139). According to Rhodes, Genshin emphasizes the centrality of contemplation. In other words, *nenbutsu* for Genshin was fundamentally, but not exclusively, meditative in orientation. As a Tendai scholiast, this makes sense. However, while Genshin did emphasize the efficacy of the recitative *nenbutsu* for the attainment of birth in the Pure Land, he understood the term *nenbutsu* as referring to various forms of contemplative and meditative practices as well, and understood the recitative form within the context of other practices found within diverse parts of a diverse ritual regime.

In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 6, “Nenbutsu for Special Occasions,” Genshin considers various forms of *nenbutsu* practice. Rhodes notes that in this section Genshin discusses the deathbed *nenbutsu*, wherein Genshin places special emphasis on the recitative *nenbutsu* in accordance with the *Contemplation Sutra*.

In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 7, “Benefits of the Nenbutsu,” Genshin enumerates various benefits that the *nenbutsu* practitioner will experience, such as the purification of negative karma, the protection of buddhas, visions of buddhas, freedom from the evil realms of rebirth, and, of course, rebirth in the Pure Land.

In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 8, “Proofs for the Nenbutsu,” Genshin cites several texts that praise the practice of *nenbutsu*. In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 9, “Various Practices for Birth,” Genshin mentions other practices that will lead to Pure Land rebirth besides *nenbutsu* practice. In *Ōjōyōshū*, chapter 10, “Discussion of Doctrinal Problems,” Genshin discusses various topics in Pure Land doctrine that were debated within the Tendai tradition.

In chapter 7, “Genshin’s Later Years,” Rhodes notes that toward the end of his life, Genshin increasingly came to focus on the Pure Land path, but also points out that Genshin has often been reduced to his later identity as a Pure Land practitioner; however, he was well versed in various areas of study, including Tendai, logic, and Abhidharma (pp. 179–80). Because our knowledge of Genshin is often conditioned by later interpretation, which tends to emphasize a sectarian perspective on Pure Land Buddhism as distinct from other “schools,” it is important to remember that Genshin’s presentation of the Pure Land path takes for granted a catholic Tendai Mahayana perspective, and in the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin draws upon the whole range of *kenmitsu* Buddhist texts and traditions in order to provide the reader with the essentials for rebirth (p. 174).

In chapter 8, “The Six Paths and the Pure Land,” Rhodes narrates Genshin’s descriptions of the hells (pp. 183–202), as well as the hungry ghosts (pp. 202–6), animals (p. 206), and *asuras* (pp. 206–7). In the estimation of this reviewer, and perhaps this reflects my own students’ interests, this chapter of Rhodes’s study will be a useful text to assign in classes dealing with Buddhist cosmology and views of the afterlife. Rhodes notes that Genshin’s description of the human realm is the second longest section after the hells (p. 207). Certainly, this conveys Genshin’s critical view of the realm of human rebirth during his particular historical context. It seems perhaps that by Genshin’s

estimation, to be reborn anywhere in the six realms of samsara might be considered an unfortunate rebirth. Indeed, it is well known in traditional Buddhist sources that heavenly rebirth might appear to be an improvement on human birth, but ultimately even this realm leads to suffering and continued entrenchment in samsara (pp. 214–16). The realm of humans (pp. 207–14) is ordinarily championed as the one place from which beings may achieve awakening. By Genshin's estimation, however, the world has entered a period of decrepitude such that very few indeed may actually attain this lofty goal.

Following the description of samsara in the first chapter of the *Ōjōyōshū*, the second chapter focuses on the Pure Land, drawing upon a diverse range of texts spanning the esoteric and exoteric traditions. Here, Rhodes summarizes the ten pleasures of the Pure Land as presented by Genshin: the pleasure of being received by a host of sages, the pleasure people experience when the lotus first opens, the pleasure of the bodily marks and supernatural powers, the pleasure of the five sublime sense-objects, the pleasure of never retrogressing from bliss, the pleasure of being able to establish karmic connections, the pleasure of being in the same assembly with sages, the pleasure of beholding the Buddha and hearing the Dharma, the pleasure of being able to venerate the buddhas as one pleases, and the pleasure of progressing along the Buddhist path (pp. 216–25).

In chapter 9, “Genshin's Interpretation of the Nenbutsu,” and chapter 10, “Auxiliary Practices and Deathbed Nenbutsu,” Rhodes delves more deeply into Genshin's views on the *nenbutsu* as a broader category of Buddhist practice, as summarized above. Rhodes considers, for example, the five gates of mindfulness, and the diverse ritual regimes that may aid in the practice of *nenbutsu*. Though later Pure Land traditions may emphasize a more focused, even exclusive, approach to the recitative *nenbutsu*, for Genshin and, frankly, most Mahayana Buddhists in East Asia, the *nenbutsu* was not only itself a broader category of practice in itself, but the practice of *nenbutsu* was generally carried out within a diverse ritual regime that included devotion to other buddhas and bodhisattvas, the recitation of mantras and *dhāraṇī*, and various forms of meditative and non-meditative practices including the visualization of the marks of the Buddha (pp. 249–53).

In chapter 11, “Hōnen's Appropriation of the *Ōjōyōshū*,” Rhodes considers various ways the interpretation and use of the *Ōjōyōshū* by Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) at times departed from what Genshin may have intended. For example, Hōnen draws upon Genshin as a lineage patriarch in support of his reading of the recitative *nenbutsu* as the only effective practice for the attainment of buddhahood. As we have seen above, Genshin seems to have understood the *nenbutsu* as a broader category of meditative and non-meditative practice that can be aided and supported by various practices, and that in addition to *nenbutsu* there are other practices that may be effective for attaining

Pure Land rebirth. Genshin was a catholic Mahayana thinker who viewed the *nenbutsu* in that context. Certainly, Genshin drew upon and presented the Pure Land as a special path especially effective for our latter age, but in so doing did not reject the rest of the practices found within the broader Mahayana tradition (p. 287). Rather, it seems that Genshin marshaled that diversity in service of his project of outlining the essentials for Pure Land rebirth.

Rhodes reiterates three key points underlying Genshin's mission in writing the *Ōjōyōshū*: First, how do beings attain awakening in times of chaos? Like us today, Genshin lived in a time of great uncertainty and social, economic, and political change. In the Pure Land path, Genshin found a way to address this concern, and as we see the growing popularity of Pure Land Buddhism in later generations, we can see that while Genshin was not a prime mover necessarily, he was certainly an important contributor to an evolving Mahayana soteriological discourse rooted in the Pure Land path. Second, during the Heian period, the *nenbutsu* functioned in a diverse religious context, but emerged as a primary method whereby Buddhists could direct their own future rebirth in the Pure Land. Third, the *Ōjōyōshū* is a comprehensive text that exemplifies the catholic nature of Mahayana philosophy and practice, and is rooted in and especially prioritizes meditative forms of *nenbutsu* practice. Within this context, Genshin harnesses his considerable acumen and expertise in multiple areas of Buddhist study to promote the recitation of "Namo Amida Butsu" as a fundamental practice that renders the lofty goal of Pure Land rebirth possible even for ordinary beings.

In conclusion, this work will certainly be a classic in the field and prove extremely useful for graduate students and scholars interested in diverse fields in Japanese, Buddhist, and religious studies. Once Rhodes's translation of the *Ōjōyōshū* itself is published, I think that the work under consideration will function as a companion volume for studying the text in greater depth. I cannot recommend this book more highly.

Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan. By Bryan D. Lowe. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 296 pages. Hardback: ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-5940-4.

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This book is impressive. It offers a sophisticated and detailed account of early Buddhist manuscript copying practices in Japan, and the ritual and political cultures surrounding them. In everyday discussions of books, "dense" is sometimes synonymous with "unreadable"—but not so in this case. *Ritualized Writing* is tightly packed with infor-