

H-Net Reviews

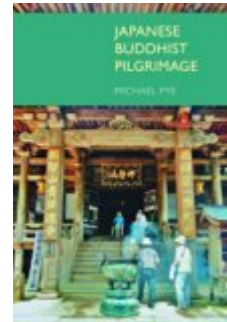
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Pye. *Japanese Buddhist Pilgrimage*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2014. 208 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84553-917-7.

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Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2015)

Commissioned by Erez Joskovich



Even though I am not a specialist in either religious studies or Buddhism, I wanted to read this book because Japanese pilgrimage is a central element in one of my current research projects, the study of a Japanese monk's pilgrimage to China in 1072-73. Moreover, in recent years I have been walking sections of the pilgrimage route around the island of Shikoku, perhaps the best known of the various pilgrimage routes in modern Japan, although I go as a hiker, not a believer. The walk offers both pleasure and a chance to experience an otherwise unfamiliar side of Japanese culture. Professor Pye's book, I hoped, would provide useful insights for both my academic and my recreational activities. It turned out to be of little relevance to my research but of enormous value to my amateur interest in contemporary pilgrimage.

Let me begin this review by briefly outlining the content of Pye's book, with comments along the way about its various strengths and occasional limitations. Pye's first chapter is an introduction explaining the general nature of pilgrimages in Japan and his approach to their study. The typical Japanese pilgrimage is circular, taking the pilgrim through a numbered sequence of Buddhist temples, or, less frequently, Shinto shrines. These are in fact the focus of his book. He points out that this pattern is distinctive. In other cultures, pilgrimages to a single goal are the norm. They are found in Japan, too—for example, the pilgrimages to the Ise shrines or Zenkōji—but they are exceptions to the Japanese rule and Pye gives them little attention. Similarly, he treats overseas pilgrimages to China and India only briefly. The introduction also offers a few comments on theories and definitions of pilgrimage, but theory is not Pye's main concern. Mostly, he writes about the practice of pilgrimage in modern Japan, based largely on data from two sources:

personal observation and primary texts. Although he may not be a trained ethnographer, he has adopted some of their methods, spending considerable time following pilgrimage routes himself and informally interviewing pilgrims he met along the way.

The "primary texts" he studies are not those of the usual Buddhistologist, who is apt to study ancient writings in classical languages. Instead, Pye studies what he terms "ephemera." Those who know Buddhism only from reading sutras may wonder what he is referring to, but not the rest of us who like to visit Japanese temples. Even the most casual tourist will accumulate a surprisingly large number of printed texts such as nicely illustrated admission tickets, guides to temple's grounds and special attractions, or perhaps *engi*, stories recounting the temple's history. If you make an effort, there is more to be had, sometimes for a modest fee: popular religious texts, *omikuji* (fortune-telling slips) that may warn of potential misfortunes, amulets offering protection from such adversities, and so forth. Personally, I have long since begun to avoid collecting such things since I know I will never look at them again. Pye, however, appears to be an avid collector who has made excellent use of the items he has acquired. They form an interesting source of both data and illustrations for his book. They also became the basis of two exhibitions at his home institution in Germany, Marburg University, which also published the catalogs he authored for them, one in conjunction with his former student, Katja Triplett, now on the faculty at Marburg. Although references to the catalogs appear scattered throughout his footnotes, WorldCat reveals that only a few libraries hold copies. Let us be thankful for interlibrary loan!

Of course, personal observation and ephemera are not his only source of data, as his bibliography reveals. Pye is a polyglot and so, in addition to works in Japanese and English, studies in French and German that those of us in the English-speaking world are apt to overlook are also included. Nobody is perfect, however, and let me add a couple of items he missed that students of Japanese pilgrimage might want to read. First, he cites only the original German version of Alfred Bohner's 1931 study of the Shikoku pilgrimage, omitting the translations in to English and Japanese that might be useful to those of us whose command of German is not as good as Pye's.[1] Among the ephemera Pye discusses are *o-fuda*, or, in his translation, "pilgrims' slips." In 2011, Musée Guimet in Paris had a show of those collected by the late French Japanologist Bernard Frank, for which a beautiful and informative catalog was produced under the supervision of Josef Kyburz.[2] For some reason this catalog has found its way into more libraries than Pye's, but he has overlooked it. If you want learn more about Japanese Buddhist "ephemera," this is a good place to look (if you read French).

In addition to outlining theories and methods, Pye's introduction explains that he will present his material "in terms of three organizing concepts, route, transaction and meaning" (p. 6). The bulk of his book, the next four chapters, is devoted to the first of these, each chapter offering a detailed and colorful description of one category of pilgrimage in Japan. The first treats pilgrimages devoted to the bodhisattva Kannon (Ch. Guanyin; Skt. Avalokitêśvara). The original version of this pilgrimage is a circuit of thirty-three temples in Kansai, the area around Japan's ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara. It became a model for other routes, notably a similar one centered on Japan's modern capital of Tokyo and a shorter version in Chichibu, about a two-hour drive northwest of Tokyo. The next chapter is devoted to the pilgrimage best known outside Japan, the circuit of eighty-eight temples around the island of Shikoku and imitations of it found elsewhere. This is followed by two chapters treating less familiar routes, first those devoted to Buddhist deities and then those focused on other miscellaneous divinities, most of them Shinto. Among the latter are a few "patriotic shrine pilgrimages" that may have seen their heyday in prewar times but have persisted into the twenty-first century. Although Pye's account suggests that current versions may not be closely linked to ultranationalist fanaticism in the manner of Yasukuni Shrine, it does remind of us how religion can be used for nationalist purposes.

These chapters offer a bit of historical background, but mostly reveal Pye's gift for empirical ethnographic research. This is not to say they lack interpretative insights. He also calls attention to interesting features, among them miniaturization and enumeration. A long pilgrimage may not be practical for everyone. For example, even on a tour bus, the complete Shikoku pilgrimage can take eleven days and cost ¥168,000 (about \$1,400, c.f. <http://www.tokubus-kanko.co.jp/88/2015/88-2015-zen.php>), and that does not include the time and expense of getting to and from Shikoku. Those who lack the time and resources can find, perhaps closer to home, shortened symbolic versions of the full pilgrimage that can be completed in a matter of hours. Atop a hill behind one of the actual pilgrimage temples, I found a miniature version of the full circuit that could be covered in a few minutes. Pye also notes the tendency to number the places of worship along the pilgrimage route. At the risk of treading the treacherous path to essentialism, I suspect these are part of more general patterns in Japanese culture. For miniaturization, think bonsai, netsuke, or, for those of us old enough to remember them, transistor radios and the Walkman. The tendency to enumerate is a more interesting pattern. Those of us who study traditional Japanese culture will know the concept of *meisū*, or "famous numbers." Standard reference works such as the classic *Dokushi Biyō* (Tools for reading history, 1933) will have a whole section devoted to them, starting with *ichiin* (the one senior cloistered—i.e., retired—emperor) and working its way up to *Hyakunin Isshu jinmei* (the one hundred selected poets, named) twenty-six pages later. I had always assumed this mode of thinking must have derived from China, with its "four books," "five mountains," and so forth. When I looked up the characters for *meisū* (Ch. *mingshu*) in a Chinese dictionary, however, I discovered that the term may be there, but it does not have its familiar (to me) Japanese meaning. Instead, an online Chinese-English dictionary defines the term as "(grammar) number plus classifier; household (in census)," (<http://www.yellowbridge.com/>). Print dictionaries I looked at agree with that. Although the tendency to enumerate may have Chinese origins, the Japanese seem to have followed through on the idea more thoroughly. As a Japan specialist rather than a Buddhologist, I wish Pye had speculated on how miniaturization and enumeration in pilgrimage relate to more general patterns in Japanese culture. When discussing what is "Buddhist" about Japan's pilgrimages, he acknowledges that he might be accused of essentialism, but he goes ahead and discusses the issue anyhow. He might have taken that attitude toward these matters.

After exploring the various pilgrimage routes in Japan, Pye moves on to the final two of his organizing concepts, which get briefer treatment. The first is what he labels “transaction,” which turns out to be a description of what pilgrims actually do at the sites they visit to confirm that they are indeed pilgrims and not mere tourists. Pye acknowledges that recreation is a part of these pilgrimages, but he stresses their concurrent devotional nature, which, in his analysis, typically is demonstrated by three actions: depositing evidence of the visit, performing a devotional act, and acquiring evidence of the visit. These actions produce the ephemera that he studies. The “pilgrims’ slips” mentioned above are what one deposits; the devotional act might take the form of reciting a sutra or chanting a “song,” either of which requires a text; and proof of the visit is received in the form of a seal stamped most often in a booklet, with an inscription brushed on top of it. One might expect the next chapter, “The Meaning of Japanese Buddhist Pilgrimage,” to be more philosophical, and it does indeed seek to find Buddhist meaning in the pilgrimages described (as noted above), but Pye remains focused on his data, which is fascinating. It includes a discussion of the pilgrim’s special attire. Here, Pye does note that this is part of a general Japanese pattern of having distinctive garb for many activities. In this case, he provides a nice picture showing what the properly dressed pilgrim should look like, one of many interesting illustrations taken from the ephemera that Pye has collected. He also translates and explains examples of the texts a pilgrim might recite. In a final chapter, Pye offers some general conclusions, which might be summarized as stressing that the form of the pilgrimages may be distinctively Japanese, but the Buddhist ones do

reflect basic Mahāyāna teachings. Pye never denies that touristic and commercial elements are part of the pilgrimages he describes, but he makes a strong case for the primacy of their religious nature.

The book is attractively put together and well written. Pye has a good eye for interesting details. I had known that Kyoto’s Eikandō temple is famed for its spring blossoms and autumn colors. Now I also know that it has one of the most exclusive kindergartens in Japan. He also has a sense of humor. When he identifies a type of booklet as a “leporello,” he explains in a footnote, “This unnecessarily obscure term for folding booklets included here because it may be met with in libraries or museums” (p. 194). I did find a few minor errors and typos. Emperor Go-Shirakawa reigned only two years, not 402 years, but I think most readers would recognize that as a simple typo. If you are looking for historical analysis or grand theory, Pye’s book may disappoint you, but if you want to learn how pilgrimages work in modern Japan, it is an excellent place to start.

Notes

[1]. David C. Moreton, trans., *Two on a Pilgrimage: The 88 Holy Places of Shikoku* (Bremen: Outlook Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011); and Hisamitsu Satō and Toshihide Yoneda, trans., *Dōgyō Ninin no Nenro: Shikoku Hachijūhakkasho Reijō* (Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku, 2012).

[2]. Josef A. Kyburz, ed., *Ofuda: Images Gravées des Temples du Japon—La Collection Bernard Frank* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises: diff. de Boccard, 2011).

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Citation: Robert Borgen. Review of Pye, Michael, *Japanese Buddhist Pilgrimage*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2015.

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