

The Acceptance of Zen Buddhism and Japan-U.S. Relations in the Cold War America

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Introduction

Around the same time as the Cold War broke out, Eastern religions or philosophies were accepted by American intellectuals of the time as alternative values to the conformism. Especially in the 1950s, the writers and the poets such as J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder adopted Zen Buddhism for their works to represent the voices of those who were oppressed, and to actively show a possibility of spiritual freedom in a different culture. Their use of Zen koan or thought of D. T. Suzuki, which could be associated with Japan, made their creative activity look like a challenge to the wearisome uniformity of the U.S. society in the Cold War era.

However, the acceptance of Zen Buddhism did not always mean being subversive in the U. S. at that time. With the outbreak of the Korean War, the momentum of getting Japan on the side of anti-communist alliance was growing. The U. S. government set to work on changing the image of Japan from the former enemy to the pro-American country, and in that process, Zen Buddhism was retold through media such as newspapers and magazines as one of Japanese cultures and minds acceptable to the U. S. It was, therefore, the object to be positively grasped.

It is noteworthy that Zen Buddhism, which had once been the religion of hostile country, Japan, found favor with the two opposing positions: the beat writers and the U.S. government. They contributed to so-called Zen boom in a different way, producing multiple images of Zen Buddhism in the U. S. This paper will focus on the historical background of Zen boom, and examine how the images were constructed under the influence of Japan-U.S. relations.

1

Contrary to the Cold War period that Zen Buddhism was broadly accepted, it was the target for elimination during World War II. For example, it is well known that Executive Order 9066 forced Japanese Americans into relocating to concentration camps, but according to Richard Hughes Seager, actually more than half of whom were Buddhist and the number of these reached to 61,719 (79). Among them, Buddhist monks were regarded as more dangerous than others because they played a leading role in Japanese American community, and as *The New York Times* reported on March 14, 1942, borne the brunt of the government's suppression:

In a renewal of raids aimed at "dangerous enemy aliens" throughout California, Federal agents and police moved today against suspected Nazi propagandists in the Bay area and seized nearly 200 Japanese, including six Buddhist priests, in the southern part of the State . . . Thirteen teachers in former Japanese language schools were arrested in the San Diego area, and seven persons, including four young Buddhist priests, and a woman, were seized at Fresno. (9)

In this article, Buddhist monks were lumped together with Nazi propagandists, labeled as enemies within. As well as Nazism, in fact, Buddhism was the object to be purged from the States. However, the reason was not simply because Buddhism evoked Japan, but because it had un-American aspect.

Ruth Benedict, who analyzed Japanese people under the government during World War II, argues in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946) that Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, takes root in Japanese mentality and how it is far different from that of Americans. She takes "muga," which means a state of perfect self-denial in Zen Buddhism, as an example of the Japanese mindset:

Suzuki, the great authority on Zen Buddhism, describes muga as 'ecstasy with no sense of *I am doing it*,' 'effortlessness.' The 'observing self' is eliminated; a man 'lose himself.' that is, he ceases to be a spectator of his acts . . . Such concepts are eloquent testimony to the heavy burden the Japanese make out of self-watchfulness and self-surveillance. They are free and efficient, they say, when these restraints are gone. (220–22)

As seen in Benedict's examination, during World War II, Zen Buddhism revealed the difference in mentality between Japanese and Americans. She examines that for Japanese, the observing self is the obstacle that restricts their action, so that the state of *muga* means freedom. But for Americans, she says, it is equivalent to "the rational principle within them" (222); In other words, the state of *muga* does not mean freedom, but irrationality. This analysis clearly shows that *muga* in Japanese mind was regarded as a bad aspect that Japanese potentially have and therefore considered incompatible with Americans.

Given the fact that the U.S. saw Buddhism as the inappropriate thought, it can be said that believing in it was nothing less than un-American act during World War II, making Buddhist practitioners look like the enemy aliens. They were, so to speak, branded the foreign element that should have been eliminated.

2

Soon after the end of World War II, the environment surrounding Buddhism completely changed. The U.S. started to retell Buddhism as one of "good" parts of Japan as if to renew its un-American image. This astonishingly rapid transformation was brought about because of Korean War. When North Korea invaded South Korea under the instruction of the Soviet Union in mid-June 1950, the U. S. government needed to contain an expansion of communism into East Asia and therefore to draw Japan into the capitalist camp as a bulwark of anti-communism. This crisis led the Allied Powers to conclude a peace treaty with Japan at the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference, which was the beginning of new partnership between the U. S. and Japan.

For the U. S. at that time, it was urgent to change the image of Japan as the former enemy. According to Yuka Tsuchiya, the U.S. government conducted a variety of public information activities both in and out of the U. S. in order to show that Japan made progress as a result of U.S. information and education policy (226). Such activities were carried out at the time when the peace treaty was signed between them, which gradually transformed the image of Japan into pro-American country.

This new image of Japan was disseminated by the media, widely spread to the general public. For instance, *Life* magazine featured the postwar Japan in its September 10, 1951 issue as if to go along with the government policy. The article entitled “The Birth of A New Japan” emphasized that Japanese learned democracy, maintaining the peaceful stability under the U. S. occupation after the World War II. Especially, the article frequently used the word “new” to introduce the postwar Japan, which can be said to sweep away the former image, thereby producing Japan as the newly joined pro-American country.

Thus, with the beginning of the Cold War, there developed the tendency in the U.S. society to accept Japan. In the midst of that trend, major tabloids or magazines started featuring Buddhism culture including Zen Buddhism. For example, the quiet and modest life of Zen Buddhist monks appeared in December 1951 issue of *Life* magazine as follows:

During the last war all but an octogenarian and the chief priest of the monastery shown in these pictures, Heirinji temple near Tokyo, followed Japan's armed forces into battle. Now they follow only the rigid work schedules and intense meditation which identify the Zennists, for they are the spiritual descendants of 6th Century Indian teacher who sat nine years in profound abstraction until his legs withered and fell off. (64–65)

This article titled “The Example of Japan” reported that the monks observed the Buddhist precepts in their daily lives, and were now very rational unlike at the time of World War II. Zen Buddhism, which had been the object to be eliminated during wartime, was positively taken up here, and its irrational image was dispelled.

However, even more notable is that this article did not urge the public to gain a correct understanding of Zen Buddhism itself. The focus of it was not the essence of Zen thought such as the concepts of satori or muga, but the figure of Zen Buddhist monks who behaved in an orderly manner and did not threaten norms. In other words, the ideological side of Zen Buddhism, which had been identified as “un-American” by the U.S. government, was ignored; instead, the monks’ unswerving adherence to their norms was exclusively affirmed. What this article emphasized was, in short, the harmless aspect of

Zen Buddhism.

The reason that *Life* magazine highlighted the harmlessness of Zen Buddhism seems to be closely related to the social situation in the Cold War America. The feature of the U.S. society that emerged after Truman Doctrine can be summed up in a single word: conservatism. The U.S. containment policy created an atmosphere in which the U.S. citizens approved the ethics of white Protestants as a guiding principle, accelerating the standardization of the society and its people. Thus, the behavior or thought that could disturb the public order was inevitably the object of elimination. However, this can be considered the momentum that Zen Buddhism was accepted in this conservative U.S. domestic situation, because the figure of Zen Buddhist monks was far from the images of revolt or deviation in that they act in obedience to their religious precepts. Rather, it had affinity with the tendency in the Cold War America to emphasize conformity with the social norms, which therefore laid the groundwork for the positive media coverage seen in *Life* magazine that Zen Buddhism was harmless, not conflicting with the U.S. society.

At about the same time that *Life* magazine dealt with the calm life of Zen monks, Daisetz Suzuki (1870–1966), an authority in Zen Buddhism, began giving lectures at Columbia University¹. It is well known that Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg attended at Daisetz's lectures and later became serious Zen practitioners under the influence of him. The fact that the beat writers, who clearly opposed to the consumer society, devoted themselves to Zen Buddhism indicates an irony; the practice of Zen Buddhism, unlike its "harmless" image in the media, could be the way to show their resistance. They actually led a modest life like real Zen monks not to catch up in the taking heavy consumption for granted, and therefore criticized the consumerism. With their practical action, they thus revealed that Zen Buddhism did not conform to the side of the establishment.

Their practical life of Zen Buddhism can be seen in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical novel, *The Dharma Bums* (1958). Its subject is a wandering life of Ray Smith, Japhy Rider, and Alvah Goldbook, with particular emphasis on their search for a new value in Zen thought and a critique of consumer culture within the social system². According to Kenneth K. Tanaka, the title *The Dharma Bums* means wanderers who live in freedom and truth, and three of them take

on the role of the Dharma Bum (114). In the story, it is described that Dharma Bums have to break out of the consumption cycle of mass production and mass consumption, and this is none other than the clear rejection of American lifestyle during the Cold War. As Tsuchiya points out, consumption was recommended in order to support capitalism and show the affluence of the U.S. lifestyle at that time, and therefore the model behavior was to actively and constantly consume products (218). However, it brought materialism in the U.S. society as well, which made people become a tool for encouraging consumption. Thus, being Dharma Bums mean cutting ties with capitalistic world and living a plain life.

In the story, for example, Japhy Rider lives in a grody little shack where he has only kitchen utensils neatly wrapped in cloth, *setta* and *tabi*, and a lot of books concerning Buddhism. As noted by Hirotada Ohara in the story annotation for *Zen Hippie* [Japanese version of *The Dharma Bums*], it is customary for Zen monks practicing in Zen-do to wrap their kitchen utensils in cloth after a meal (24). Japhy seems to bring their custom in his lifestyle, getting closer to the very image of Zen monks. Of course, however, he does not cater to the image of “harmless” Zen monks that the media offered, but rather objects to the social system by erasing the sign of mundane world in his living space.

Thus, the feature of Zen Buddhism that emerged during the Cold War was formed by this collision between the opposing images of obedience and disobedience to the U.S. society. On one side, the media, in conjunction with the U.S. foreign policy toward Japan, set Zen monks up for the harmless figure, and on the other the beat writers became Zen monks to rebel against the state-led capitalism. As a result of which both of them interpreted the figure of Zen monks at their convenience, Zen Buddhism established the ambivalent, yet intriguing position in the U.S. society.

3

The ambivalent position of Zen Buddhism in the U.S. can be seen from the fact that *The Dharma Bums* escaped the government censorship of publications although it was directly critical of the social system. Contrary to *The Dharma Bums*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) was subject to

the censorship because of “his distinct references to homosexuality” (Sova 144), which were considered as a taboo from the view of the U.S. cultural norms at the time³. *Howl* had much in common with *The Dharma Bums* in that both intentionally broke the norms, however, the government did not lump them together as a result of two primary factors.

One is that Zen Buddhism closely tied to the image of Japan as the pro-American country and was not treated as the taboo like homosexuality due to concerns about which a part of Japan’s image within the U.S. might be disintegrated. As long as there existed the element of Zen Buddhism, therefore, the government could not single out *The Dharma Bums* as the subject to the censorship even if it used Zen Buddhism as the best antidote to consumerism. The other is that *The Dharma Bums* favorably portrayed the interaction with Japan. In the story, Ray Smith narrates that his friend, Japhy is “invited by an American foundation to stay in a monastery and study under a Master”(127). Actually, Gary Snyder, who was the model for Japhy, stayed in Japan for ten years since 1956 to practice Zen Buddhism, which was, in fact, the action that met the social demand of the time. During the Cold War era, the U. S. government encouraged Americans to go to Asia including Japan to spread capitalism and democracy. According to Christina Klein, “[b]ecause the U.S. never acquired as extensive a formal empire in Asia as the British or French, . . . the U.S. in the early years of the Cold War did not possess a large, professional, institutionalized machinery for producing knowledge about Asia”(114) and therefore Americans who traveled Asia were expected to “act as ‘reporters’ and not just ‘eyewitnesses’ . . . to document the insights they gained from their encounters”(114). As if to stimulate their interest in traveling Asia, magazines or newspapers at that time set introduction articles about Asian culture. Traveling Asia was, in a sense, the proper behavior of Americans at the time of the Cold War. Thus, Japhy’s behavior in *The Dharma Bums* that travels to Japan to interact with Zen monks is exactly what the U.S. government wanted Americans to do. Before going to Japan, he says to Ray, “East’ll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it’ll be guys like us that can start the thing”(170). He dreams of finding the new possibility that the U.S. does not have, however, his enthusiasm to learn Zen Buddhism in Japan unexpectedly reinforces the speculation of

the U.S. that wants to strengthen the ties with Asia by capitalism and democracy.

That *The Dharma Bums* was not openly criticized for its antagonism against the social system was thus backed by the importance of Japan as an allied country of the U.S during the Cold War era. It might be said that Zen Buddhism depicted in a favorable way in this novel was convenient for the U.S. rushing to build the relationship with Japan; Japhy can be a supporter of Japan-U.S. cultural exchange, showing the amicable attitude toward Japan. *The Drama Bums*, therefore, fulfilled the U.S. aspiration of the time.

Conclusion

As is clear from the exceptional treatment of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, Zen Buddhism was not uniformly accepted in the U.S. There were two images happening at once, which intersected with one another on the back of Japan-U.S. relationship; the U.S. government used Zen Buddhism's harmless image as a part of the effort to improve the relations with Japan after World War II, whereas the beat writers used its anti-consumerist image as the way of social criticism, which therefore could be the threat to the values of capitalist America. They were thus divided over capitalism and consumerism, however, did not conflict with each other only in the acceptance of Zen Buddhism. For the U.S. government, the beat writers who positively adopted Zen Buddhism into their works played a part in the friendly relationship between Japan and the U.S., and for the beat writers, the use of Zen Buddhism was the only way to confront the social system without being restricted. In this way, Zen Buddhism could satisfy the desires of them and was accepted in the U.S. during the Cold War era.

Notes

1. Soiku Shigematsu, who edited and translated the transcript of the lectures between 1952 and 1953 published as *Suzuki Daisetsu Koronbia Daigaku Semina Kogi* [*Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's Columbia University Seminar Lectures*] explained in its preface that his lectures were mainly about advanced Zen Buddhist philosophy that seems to be difficult to understand for American students, but attracted great deal of their interest and triggered a Zen boom in the U.S. (6–8).

2. According to Kenneth K. Tanaka, Ray Smith is based on Jack Kerouac himself, Japhy Rider on Gary Snyder, and Alvah Goldbook on Allen Ginsberg (114).

3. Establishing ideal family was one of the U.S. cultural norms during the Cold War, so that the homosexual who did not have a family became a target of criticism.

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