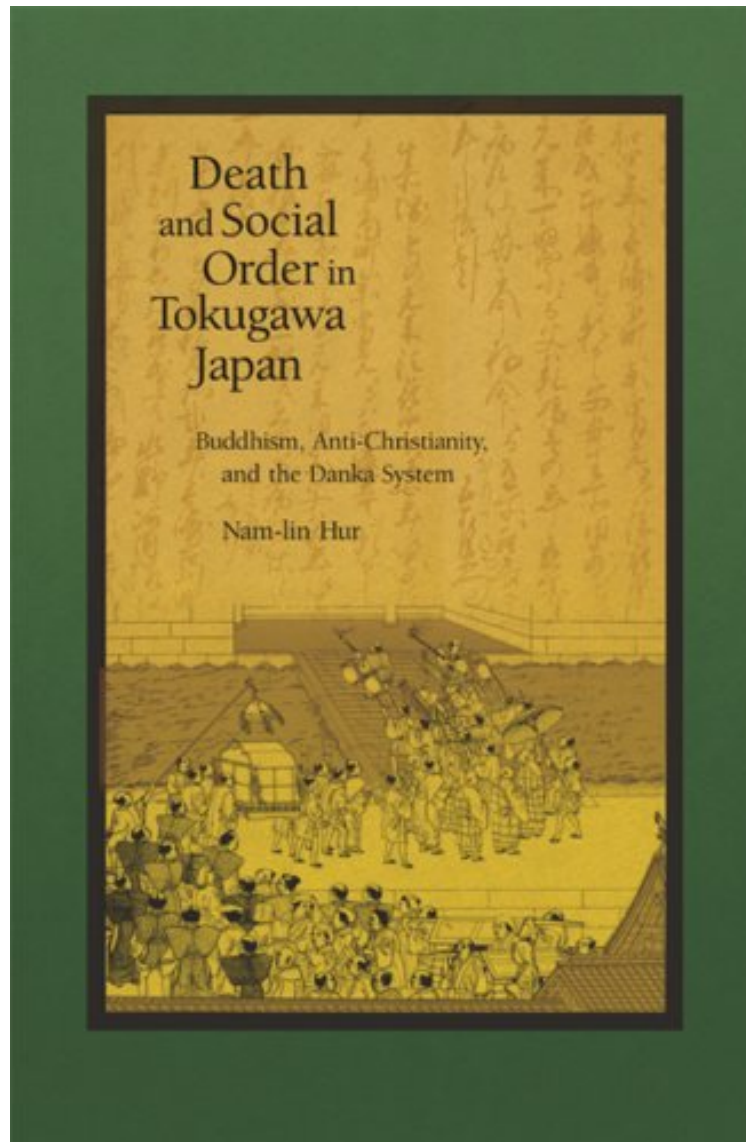


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Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System (Harvard East Asian Monographs)

Nam-lin Hur

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Nam-lin Hur : Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System (Harvard East Asian Monographs) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth

my time, and all praised Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System (Harvard East Asian Monographs):

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Digging Up Dirt on "Decadent" Buddhism By Crazy Fox I've been dying for a book on this subject to be published. Books on Tokugawa Buddhism are scarce enough anyway, and the development of the danka system during this era (whereby every Japanese household became affiliated with a temple and depended on that temple for its funeral and memorial rites) is in and of itself a major aspect of Japanese Buddhist history worthy of study as well as indispensable in understanding contemporary Japanese Buddhism accurately--the way you'd see real temples actually functioning if you stepped off a plane today and checked them out. So I was glad enough to see such a large, authoritative-looking book by an academic press focused on this understudied important subject, and that by an author whose prior book (*Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensoji and Edo Society*) I enjoyed thoroughly. I was in for a grave disappointment. Well, not totally. The book is carefully and meticulously researched, certainly. A lot of work has clearly gone into it, including painstaking readings in difficult primary materials and extensive consideration of the findings of Japanese experts in this field (some of which can be pretty dry)--all of this Hur makes available in English probably for the first time. In Part I he discusses and analyzes the origins and development of the danka system along with the Tokugawa government's shifting religious policies in fine detail, clarifying in a satisfyingly convincing manner the complex contours of a process that usually gets sketched out in rough, inaccurate outlines. And fascinating incidents, events, and citations fill the book's pages from Intro to Conclusion. So far so good, and yet much of this effort is subverted from within by the author's careless and faulty if not obsolete analysis. Tokugawa Buddhism has been understudied in the first place because it was dismissively characterized as corrupt and decadent, particularly by Tsuji Zennosuke in the 1950's. Recent studies have finally started overcoming this, and yet Hur takes us right back to the old times, setting up an idealized, abstracted Buddhism somehow above politics and economics, institutionally and doctrinally watertight, and dedicated to the spiritual enlightenment of the individual. Whenever actual Buddhism fails to live up to this phantom ideal to which it never aspired, it is harshly taken to task by Hur as decadent and corrupt or derided as tainted and syncretistic. Sometimes this results in overwrought, sophomoric posturing on the author's part as he denounces what he perceives as Buddhist abuses with self-righteous and vaguely unscholarly prose. Along these lines, the polemical criticisms of Buddhism and Buddhists by Confucian scholars and government officials are often accepted at face value as fact plain and simple. Hur consistently and rather simplistically treats Buddhism, Shinto, and even Shugendō as distinct, mutually impermeable entities when so much scholarship over the last few decades has shown the pitfalls of this, especially when dealing with Japanese religious history before 1868, and this often skews his analysis badly. This goes for different Buddhist schools as well, and anachronistically assuming them to be self-contained and mutually exclusive in doctrine and ritual creates all sorts of analytical distortions and even factual errors (Todaiji has never belonged to the Tendai school despite what Hur says on page 176, misled perhaps because "Tendai"-style Lotus Repentance Rites were performed there in the Heian period). Certain problematic sources such as the anthropologist Yanagita Kunio are quoted straightforwardly and uncritically, and the methodological blunder is constantly made of referring to rituals and texts and taking them to be what "the Japanese" literally believed just as is--such is never a safe extrapolation. Finally, some errors are just weird, as when on page 166 Hur claims that the Japanese didn't practice cremation widely (!) because it "posed an affront to the resurrection of the body"--a jarringly Christian concept bizarrely out of context. What went wrong here? Does Hur have some kind of axe to grind with Buddhism? Was he so busy writing this massive study that he didn't bother reading other works in his field? Did he not notice that his critique of Tsuji Zennosuke is by and large a self-critique? Whatever the case may be, the end result is a much-needed study with loads of relevant and intriguing material sadly sabotaged for the most part by a host of serious if not quite deadly disorders.

Buddhism was a fact of life and death during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868): every household was expected to be affiliated with a Buddhist temple, and every citizen had to be given a Buddhist funeral. The enduring relationship between temples and their affiliated households gave rise to the danka system of funerary patronage. This private custom became a public institution when the Tokugawa shogunate discovered an effective means by which to control the populace and prevent the spread of ideologies potentially dangerous to its power--especially Christianity. Despite its lack of legal status, the danka system was applied to the entire population without exception; it became for the government a potent tool of social order and for the Buddhist establishment a practical way to ensure its survival within the socioeconomic context of early modern Japan. In this study, Nam-lin Hur follows the historical development of the danka system and details the intricate interplay of social forces, political concerns, and religious beliefs that drove this "economy of death" and buttressed the Tokugawa governing system. With meticulous research and careful analysis, Hur demonstrates how Buddhist death left its mark firmly upon the world of the Tokugawa Japanese.

About the Author Nam-lin Hur is Associate Professor of Japanese History at the University of British Columbia.