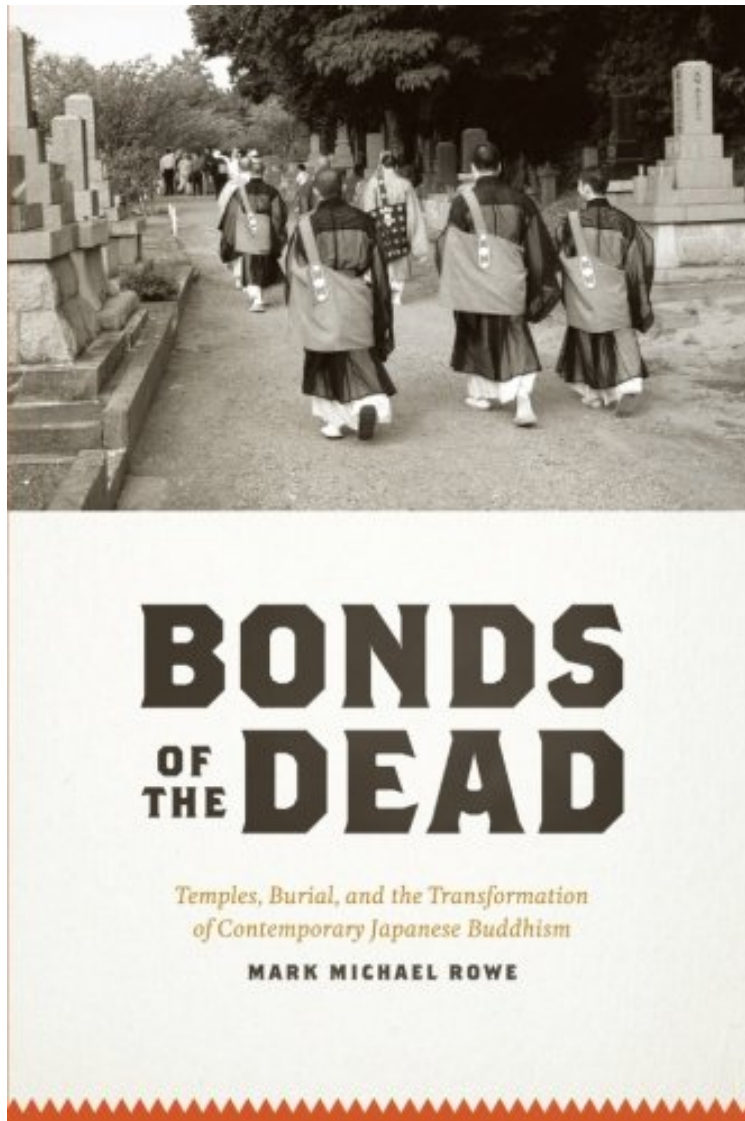


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Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism (Buddhism and Modernity)

Mark Michael Rowe

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#1587901 in Books Rowe Mark Michael 2011-11-01 2011-11-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x .90 x 6.00l, .80 #File Name: 0226730158256 pages Bonds of the Dead | File size: 74.Mb

Mark Michael Rowe : Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism (Buddhism and Modernity) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism (Buddhism and Modernity):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Excellent, accessible work

By Patrick A fascinating study of the current crisis evolution of Buddhism as it is practiced in 21st century Japan. Through interviews and visits to rural and urban temples over the better part of a decade, Rowe captures how individuals, families, priests and institutions attempt to navigate 1000-year-old traditions/customs in a hyper-modern society. One of the blurbs on the back of the book describes the writing as "breezy and entertaining" and it is definitely that. And the thing that makes this book special is that it is written by a westerner clearly fluent in Japanese and and intimate with the nation and people he writes about. It is like visiting Japan with a skilled guide.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Eternal Contradictions

By Charlie Canning The first thing that must be said about Mark Michael Rowe's *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism* is that writing about mortuary practice in contemporary Japan is an immensely ambitious proposition. At its most tranquil moments, Japan is a complex society and Japan today is anything but tranquil. In fact, one could argue that the present upheaval in Japanese society is greater than at any other time since Meiji. Discussing Japanese religion has been a complex matter since Buddhism first came to Japan from China and Korea in the sixth century. Shinto, the native religion, had its own pantheon and system, but it wasn't until Buddhism arrived on Japan's shores that anyone bothered to figure out what those were. Faced with a competing worldview, the Japanese had to account for life and death in a manner that could be communicated to other people. Over the years, they discovered that Shinto was pretty good when it came to living but that Buddhism had a more complete system for dying. More importantly, Buddhism had an afterlife. Hence, the Shinto wedding and the Buddhist funeral.

Rowe begins *Bonds of the Dead* with a personal vignette of a visit to his wife's family grave in rural Tokushima. Rowe, his wife and son attend to the grave in the traditional manner, cleaning it, refilling vases with water and shikimi branches, lighting incense, offering food and drink. This act of veneration is a clear sign to the spirit of the dead that the living are honoring them. It opens up a line of communication between the deceased family members or ancestors and their descendants. They talk in the way that Rowe suggests in the Introduction and in the Conclusion. Rowe speculates about what will happen to the family grave in the future. His wife has no brothers and she and her sisters live far away. Will the grave be neglected or abandoned like so many of the other graves in temple graveyards and cemeteries across Japan? What will happen to the spirits then? Who will look after them? But since *Bonds of the Dead* is an academic thesis, Rowe has to keep it between the rails. His study is about contemporary Japanese Buddhism and the care of the dead; of how religious, political, social, and economic forces over the course of the twentieth century led to the emergence of new funerary practices in Japan and how, as a result, the care of the dead has become the most fundamental challenge to the continued existence of Japanese temple Buddhism. (2-3) The only speculative parts are in the Introduction and the Conclusion. The rest of book is in the Durkheim mold: marshal the numbers, look for causative factors for the peaks and valleys, account for those. The numbers are worrying. Although 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, the *danka* system of parishioner support for the temples is breaking down. Temples are closing, graves are being abandoned. (3) After setting the scene in Chapter One (*The Death of Japanese Buddhism*), Rowe takes up what he refers to as the central topic of this book a new style of grave that emerged at the end of the 1980s in response to calls for forms of burial that were no longer premised on the extended family and thus would not be abandoned. (44) Rowe explains how the fear of *muen* (being without a grave or someone to look after your grave in the future) led to the rise of eternal memorial graves and burial societies to fill the gap. Unlike with the *ie* system where someone in your extended family would look after your needs or the *danka* system where your temple priest would handle matters, the grave is maintained by a third party, but not memorialized in the Buddhist idiom. Rather than eternal memorial, what one finds instead is eternal administration (*kanri*). (61) The middle chapters document two interesting hybrids: Myokoji in Niigata Prefecture and Tochoji in Tokyo. The Annon Grave of Myokoji is an attempt to address the new social realities such as growing emphasis on the individual, nuclearization of families, declining birth rates, and increases in population shifts, singles, divorce, and depopulation in a Buddhist context (69). Similarly, En no Kai of Tochoji seeks to break free of traditional bonds to allow people to choose where and with whom they will be interred. (120) Chapter Five: *Scattering Ashes* is about cremation and the scattering of ashes in the forest or in the sea. The practice is considered by many Japanese to be either heretical, unhygienic, or both. Someone may end up in the food supply. What strikes one throughout *Bonds of the Dead* is exactly this material view of the spirit. In spite of all the precepts and teachings of Buddhism that either suggest or state that the spirit of the deceased moves on after death, custom seems to indicate that most Japanese believe that the spirit stays with the bones or the ashes. There is a doctrinal contradiction here that Rowe discusses in the final chapter: *Sectarian Researchers and the Funeral Problem*. What's troubling the priests at the Buddhist universities and the sectarian research centers is not Japanese funerary customs per se, but that temple priests have become tasked with resolving the central contradiction of a Buddhist priest performing a memorial service for someone who has left the world. If the stated goal of Buddhism is to free oneself and others from rebirth and attachment, why are priests delivering eulogies and blessing corpses? The curious thing is that the contradiction has been with us for ages. To the average Japanese, the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism have never been as important as ancestor worship and custom. Why is Buddhist doctrine seen as a problem now? Rowe suggests that this is due to a

number of factors including the influence of Western notions of research and empiricism. There were no contradictions before scholars began looking for them. For most people in Japan, it will continue to be Shinto wedding, Buddhist funeral. What kind of funeral that is likely to be and what will be done with the ashes will depend on a number of things all of them changing. In *Bonds of the Dead*, Rowe has accounted for these changes in a fascinating ethnographic study that illuminates far beyond its thesis. From the review published in the *Kyoto Journal*.

Despite popular images of priests seeking enlightenment in snow-covered mountain temples, the central concern of Japanese Buddhism is death. For that reason, Japanese Buddhism's social and economic base has long been in mortuary services—a base now threatened by public debate over the status, treatment, and location of the dead. *Bonds of the Dead* explores the crisis brought on by this debate and investigates what changing burial forms reveal about the ways temple Buddhism is perceived and propagated in contemporary Japan. Mark Rowe offers a crucial account of how religious, political, social, and economic forces in the twentieth century led to the emergence of new funerary practices in Japan and how, as a result, the care of the dead has become the most fundamental challenge to the continued existence of Japanese temple Buddhism. Far from marking the death of Buddhism in Japan, Rowe argues, funerary Buddhism reveals the tradition at its most vibrant. Combining ethnographic research with doctrinal considerations, this is a fascinating book for anyone interested in Japanese society and religion.

"*Bonds of the Dead* contains a wealth of fascinating information that reminds us that human societies rely on religion to confront the insurmountable problem of death." (William Bodiford, University of California, Los Angeles)"About the Author Mark Michael Rowe is associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University.