

<BOOK REVIEWS>Shinto : A History By Helen  
Hardacre

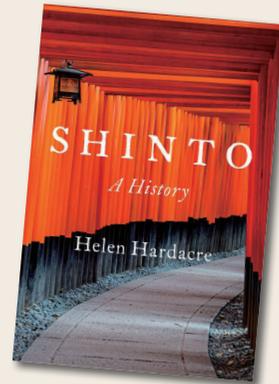
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BOOK REVIEW

*Shinto: A History*

By Helen Hardacre

Oxford University Press, 2017  
xv + 698 pages.



Reviewed by Jolyon Baraka THOMAS

It must be said in no uncertain terms that this book constitutes a major contribution to the field of Shinto studies and is a must-read for any scholar interested in the tradition. At seven hundred pages of densely packed text, it is also not a book for the faint of heart. Undergraduates will struggle to hold it up, let alone read it cover to cover. But Hardacre's elegant framing and smooth chronological organization tidily arrange information about a tradition that is notoriously difficult to define. It is a tremendous accomplishment.

Two leitmotifs run throughout the book. The first concerns whether, and how, people have understood Shinto as “public” or “private” over the course of Japan's long history. The second theme concerns the extent to which Shinto can be reasonably considered indigenous to Japan. Considering the frequency with which journalists and other nonspecialists tend to describe Shinto as the “indigenous animistic religion of Japan,” Hardacre's intervention on this score is quite welcome. She offers multiple lines of evidence showing that Shinto came to appear “Japanese” through contact with foreign epistemologies such as Buddhism (chapter 4) and Confucianism (chapter 8) and through conflict with non-Japanese adversaries such as Mongol invaders (chapter 5) and Allied occupiers (chapter 14). While the bipartite framing device is compelling, the two themes feature inconsistently in the text. In some chapters, they drive the discussion; in others, they retreat so far into the background as to be almost invisible.

Hardacre also offers a corrective for Kuroda Toshio's influential claim that Shinto had no independent existence from Buddhism for most of Japanese history, stating that she wants to address “the issue of continuity in Shinto history from a new vantage point” (p. 5).<sup>1</sup> Her main piece of evidence in support of this claim is the unbroken dominance of the Jingikan (and, in modern times, the Jinjakyoku, Jingiin, and Jinja Honchō) in overseeing kami affairs (pp. 145–46). She concedes that “Shinto” does not appear in historical sources as a *concept* until the late medieval period (p. 233), but she sees sufficient connections between shrine rites, kami veneration, and the administration of shrine affairs to describe

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1 Kuroda 1981.

these collectively as “Shinto” (p. 108).<sup>2</sup> Many of these connections concern the “public” side of Shinto.

In offering an alternative to the influential Kuroda thesis, Hardacre makes a defensible claim (we really *can* find evidence of Jingikan influence across most of Japanese history), but she also engages in some rhetorical contortions to make her point. By reifying Shinto as an autonomous agent and by simultaneously rendering Shinto as a passive instrument, Hardacre makes it somewhat difficult to see how specific stakeholders have laid claim to the tradition in particular political contexts.

I will explain what I mean by way of a concrete example. Hardacre is clearly interested in modifying the position on “State Shinto” that she laid out in her 1989 book *Shinto and the State* so that it reflects trends in recent scholarship (pp. 355–57).<sup>3</sup> However, her claim that State Shinto represents instances when Shinto mediated state ideological campaigns (pp. 403–404) leaves considerable ambiguity about what constitutes “mediation” and what can be described as “ideological.” It also assumes that *Shinto* mediated state initiatives rather than making the more defensible claim that particular stakeholders (Shinto priests, Ministry of Education bureaucrats) mobilized Shinto ideas for propagandistic purposes. Shinto therefore appears as a tool wielded by unnamed government agents: “The *use of* shrines in campaigns to force colonial subjects to assimilate is this era’s clearest example of State Shinto” (p. 432, emphasis mine). Elsewhere, she makes Shinto the active party: “Shinto had to carve out a new place for itself in this changed [that is, postwar] public realm” (p. 455). One unfortunate side effect of this rhetorical strategy is that it removes attention from the individuals who actually made tactical decisions about how to define or defend Shinto; another is that it gives the impression that Hardacre prefers an abstract, elite Shinto over whatever may have been happening at the grassroots.

Clearly this is not the case. Hardacre shows in other parts of the book that top-down initiatives never totally monopolized Shinto. (She mentions that corporations often funded shrines when the state did not, that popular sentiment supported the construction of the seemingly “ideological” Meiji Shrine, and that “new religions” also advanced Shinto ideas during the imperial period.) Chapters on Shinto and the arts (chapter 6), Edo-period pilgrimage (chapter 9), and Shinto-derived “new religions” (chapter 10) address the popular level. Chapter 15 provides a detailed analysis of the complicated negotiations between multiple interest groups staging a local festival in Fuchū City. Chapter 16 on “Heisei Shinto” also includes a discussion of how various stakeholders have envisioned religions’ duty to contribute to the “public good” in the wake of the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attacks and the triple disaster of 11 March 2011.

Hardacre’s chosen themes form helpful correctives for the commonsense understanding that Shinto is a private religion indigenous to Japan. But it is an open question whether her challenge to the Kuroda thesis is ultimately convincing. Kuroda was probably overzealous in flatly dismissing the possibility that a premodern Shinto could even exist. A truly persuasive model should allow us to investigate the times and places where conflict and contestation have given birth to many different Shintos rather than assuming that one tradition has been with us all along.

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2 On the late medieval emergence of Shinto as a concept, see Teeuwen 2002.

3 Hardacre 1989.

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