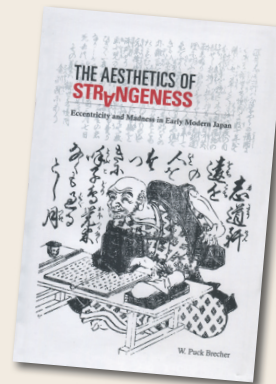


BOOK REVIEW

*The Aesthetics of Strangeness:
Eccentricity and Madness in Early
Modern Japan*

W. Puck Brecher

University of Hawai'i Press, 2013
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The nail that sticks out getspraised? Within an academic climate that is still inclined to depict the early modern Japanese as lacking in individuality, this observation is bound to raise a few eyebrows. Nonetheless, it accurately characterizes the mindset behind a cult of eccentricity (*ki*) that arose during the Edo period. Whether it was obsessing over striped patterns (Striped Kanjūrō, p. 26), staging one's own funeral (Yamazaki Hokka, p. 60), or “welcoming” a wealthy guest by placing a urinal bucket at the front gate (Ike no Taiga, p. 72), such idiosyncratic acts and their unconventional perpetrators were not regarded as socially disruptive; rather they were objects of admiration in the eyes of their contemporaries, who turned the biographies of such individuals into bestsellers. It is this fascinating premise that is the starting point of Puck Brecher's book, in which he sets out to explain how deviance—mainly that of *bunjin*—came to earn not only social tolerance, but social capital as well.

Whereas previous scholarship has evaluated early modern eccentrics as either subversive entities who ultimately failed to effect political change or heroes of a burgeoning “modern” ethos, Brecher rejects both interpretations and promises instead to offer an “interdisciplinary reconsideration of how aesthetic eccentricity emerged, evolved as a social identity, and exerted lasting impacts on Edo society” (p. 21). And interdisciplinary the work is indeed. Brecher adopts an impressively wide perspective, weaving together intellectual history, biography, and art history into a theoretically sophisticated narrative packed with ideas and anecdotes that will appeal to anyone interested in the Edo period.

Following a lucid introduction, Brecher traces how eccentricity emerged during the late seventeenth century based on a Chinese model of secular reclusion (*insei*), madness (*kyō*), and uselessness (*muyō*). The next three chapters then proceed to detail the eighteenth century transformation of eccentricity into a means for *bunjin* to construct “independent aesthetic realms for individual pleasure” (p. 90), and its subsequent domestication and commercialization in Ban Kōkei's seminal work *Kinsei kijinden* (Eccentrics of Our Time, 1790), which infused eccentricity with a native ethos. The final two chapters describe how this increasing commercialization diluted the social value of eccentricity within *bunjin* culture, causing the term to get reappropriated by “countercultural energies and political dissidents” (p. 170).

As the space of this review does not allow me to point out all of the many merits of this book, I have chosen to focus on addressing two points regarding which I feel the work might

have been improved. The first is Brecher's rather narrow focus on merely *aesthetic* eccentricity, highlighting predominantly the usual *bunjin* suspects such as Gion Nankai, Yanagisawa Kien, Baisaō, Ike no Taiga, Soga Shōhaku, Itō Jakuchū, Hattori Somon, Fukai Shidōken, Kinoshita Chōshōshi, Ishikawa Jōzan, Uragami Gyokudō, Kagawa Kageki, and Watanabe Kazan. Valuable though this perspective is, it does come at the cost of ignoring a large group of non-*bunjin* eccentrics: a diverse range of virtuous scholars, skilled physicians, chaste wives, loyal servants and filial children who appeared alongside *bunjin* in the same biographical compilations. Even though Brecher features some of these characters in short anecdotes, he makes no effort to incorporate them systematically into his study. Recognition of the need to set limits to a study notwithstanding, one cannot help but wonder how including such non-*bunjin* might have enriched the analysis. I find it hard to imagine that Brecher would, for example, evaluate filial piety as a "self-making potentiality" (p. 114) as well.

This reference to the "self" brings me to my second point: Brecher's framing of aesthetic eccentricity as a problem of "social identity." This seems a claim that is fundamentally incongruent with the sources that make up the bulk of his evidence, namely, the biographies of eccentrics. With biographies' well-known tendency to turn hagiographical, can they, in any sense, be taken to reflect reality? Brecher's evaluation of this matter is historiographically prudent, as he wholeheartedly agrees with Marvin Marcus' observation that early modern biography "concerned itself less with objective realism and more with reinventing its subjects as embodiments of certain desirable traits" (p. 117), and he correctly stresses the fact that *Kinsei kijinden* often takes deliberate pains to convert biographical data into evidence of eccentricity (p. 127). Given the inventive nature of these biographies then, in what sense are we to read them as a problem of identity, self-discovery, self-invention, or self-making potentialities? From the standpoint of the biographer, perhaps; but surely not, as Brecher would have it, from that of the eccentric. To be fair, Brecher himself is perfectly aware of the "intrinsic inaccessibility" of his subject, and suggests that the problem can be "ameliorated by attention to historical context and by plotting eccentrics positionally vis-à-vis more knowable norms" (p. 9). Yet, amelioration is not a remedy, and I do not think Brecher ultimately manages to bridge the gap between the nature of his sources and his claims about social identity. However, even without taking this leap of faith into the identity problematic, the foundations of Brecher's book stand firmly as a splendid account of changing discourse on and representations of aesthetic eccentricity.

Despite these two blemishes, this is an extremely gratifying work, offering, for the first time, a well-balanced and meticulously documented analysis of a group—a genre even—of characters that have been the playthings of a fickle historical memory that has either branded them as losers or lauded them as heroes. I have no doubt that, in the same way that these eccentrics animated and informed their society, Brecher's work will stimulate and inspire further debate on *bunjin* culture.

Reviewed by Niels Van Steenpaal