

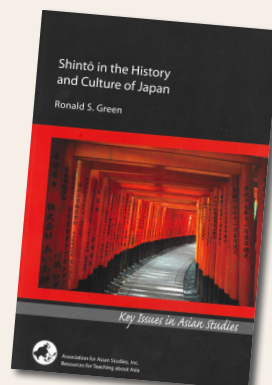
BOOK REVIEW

Shintō in the History and Culture of Japan

By Ronald S. Green

Association for Asian Studies, 2020
108 pages.

Reviewed by Ernils LARSSON



With his concise *Shintō in the History and Culture of Japan*, Ronald S. Green sets out to introduce Shinto to a broad public. Across seven themed chapters, Green sketches a portrait of Shinto's history, while also emphasizing its continued relevance in contemporary society and culture. The book is written in an accessible and easy to follow manner for readers unfamiliar with Japanese history and religion.

The first chapter begins with the question “What is Shintō?” which the book purports to address “from beginning to end” (p. 1). Green then presents a series of definitions for Shinto: a “Japanese ethnic belief,” a “tradition that has been transmitted from ancient times,” or as an almost “exclusively ... Japanese phenomenon” (pp. 1–2). Although the author references the work of one historian who has written critically about understandings of Shinto as a transhistorical entity, this thread is subsequently dropped. Instead, Shinto is used throughout the book to denote all shrines, rites, myths, and forms of *kami* worship present in the archipelago, at least from the time the *Kojiki* was put to paper in 712 CE up to the present day.

While the debate on the emergence of Shinto in ancient and medieval history is undoubtedly complex, Green's insistence on portraying Shinto as a single tradition is concerning. Its effects can be illustrated by a passage in chapter 7, where Green argues that “the religion's leaders have suggested that Shintō move away from the staunch nationalistic posture sometimes associated with its past” (p. 77). Shinto is presented not only in the singular, but also with a definite article, suggesting a leadership exists that has the authority to speak for all shrines. To the unacquainted reader, organizational divisions between different shrine lineages are likely to be lost, as are the significant divisions that exist between shrine and sect Shinto.

Green's approach leads to the amalgamation of various traditions usually differentiated within Shinto scholarship. The absence of sect Shinto is one example of this, but more significant is the book's consistent focus on the imperial institution as central to the history of Shinto. Green's often ambiguous prose makes it possible to read his book as accepting the view that “Shintō begins with legendary first emperor Jimmu, grandson of Amaterasu, in the seventh century BCE” (p. 25). Aike P. Rots has referred to this as the “imperial paradigm” of Shinto, the idea that “the essence of Shinto lies in its relationship

with the divine imperial institution.”¹ The first three chapters in Green’s book are all deeply informed by this paradigm, as they explore Shinto’s “ancient roots,” its mythology, and its role in Japanese history, all the while keeping the imperial institution at the center of the discussion.

The effects can also be seen in chapter 4, where Green writes that because of its connections to the imperial institution, Ise Shrine “is considered a preeminent shrine of Japan ... of central importance to Shinto” (p. 43). Ise Shrine was granted this status by Japan’s political leaders in the early Meiji period, and while it certainly claims a position as *primus inter pares* today, these claims are upheld through the work of a number of political and religious actors. The same chapter also includes a brief discussion of Izumo Taisha, described by Green as “one of the most important shrines to both the imperial family and the Shintō belief system” (p. 44). Unfortunately, the author pays no attention to the shrine’s history as an unsuccessful contender to Ise Shrine in the nineteenth century, described in great detail by Yijiang Zhong in a work cited by Green.² Nor does he discuss the shrine’s role within Izumo Taisha-kyō, one of the original thirteen sects of Meiji-era Shinto.

Conspicuously missing from Green’s work are the organizations behind postwar Shinto. There is no reference to what John Breen and Mark Teeuwen have called “the Shinto establishment,” perhaps best represented by Jinja Honchō, the Association of Shinto Shrines.³ While Green mentions some political controversies surrounding Shinto, including visits by LDP politicians to Yasukuni Shrine and the enshrinement of Class A war criminals, he does not seem to consider these issues particularly significant. As he writes with regards to demonstrations staged at Yasukuni, “there is little evidence to suggest that these are anything other than small fringe groups” (p. 42). Mark R. Mullins has conclusively shown in his recent *Yasukuni Fundamentalism* that the ideology behind such demonstrations is hardly a fringe phenomenon in contemporary Japan.⁴ It is noteworthy in this context that Yasukuni is omitted entirely from the chapter on “famous shrines.”

The lack of precision granted to Shinto as a concept impacts on the book’s usefulness as an introduction. This is unfortunate, as parts of the book are both informative and pleasant to read. Chapters 5 and 6, on “material culture” and “rituals and events,” stand out as particularly useful for introducing new readers to the diversity of shrine traditions in Japan. This is overshadowed, however, by Green’s lack of interest in the political and ideological facets of Shinto. “State Shinto” is briefly discussed as a historical phenomenon, yet its legacies and lingering effects in postwar Japan are completely ignored.⁵ The book would have benefitted from more nuanced reflection on Shinto as a category. Green’s work pays insufficient attention to the diversity of shrine traditions in history and contemporary society, as well as to the political machinations that have shaped Shrine Shinto since the mid-nineteenth century, and which continue to do so today.

1 Rots 2017, p. 31.

2 Zhong 2016.

3 Breen and Teeuwen 2010, pp. 199–210.

4 Mullins 2021.

5 See for instance Ama 2017, pp. 91–93.

REFERENCES

Ama 2017

Ama Toshimaro 阿満利磨. *Nihonjin wa naze mushūkyō nano ka* 日本人はなぜ無宗教なのか. Chikuma Shinsho, 2017 (1996).

Breen and Teeuwen 2010

John Breen and Mark Teeuwen. *A New History of Shinto*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Mullins 2021

Mark R. Mullins. *Yasukuni Fundamentalism: Japanese Religions and the Politics of Restoration*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2021.

Rots 2017

Aike P. Rots. *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Zhong 2016

Zhong Yijiang. *The Origin of Modern Shinto in Japan: The Vanquished Gods of Izumo*. Bloomsbury, 2016.