Research Report

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Title of Research:

Ruth Fuller Sasaki and Western Zen: Transpacific Culture in Post-Occupied Japan

Purpose of Research:

In my research, I examined the archival records of the First Zen Institute at Ryosen-an at Daitoku-ji monastery from the 1950's. It was established in 1952 by Ruth Fuller Sasaki as a school for Westerners interested in studying Zen Buddhism.

This research will contribute to a chapter of my dissertation that explores the Zen “boom” of the late 1950’s in the United States. At precisely the same time that Zen was experiencing something of a decline in Japan, due to its association with wartime militarism, it sparked a great deal of interest in the U.S. For many Americans, it seemed the practice of Zen Buddhism provided an avenue through which to regain a sense of spiritualism in what they felt was a soulless postwar society. This research also helped me discover how individuals like Fuller Sasaki and her students aided this trans-Pacific exchange. The first Westerner (of any national origin or gender) to become an ordained Zen priest, Fuller Sasaki was one of the leading Zen proponents in the U.S., and was typically quoted in any article on Zen that appeared in the mainstream American press. In opening her institute she also provided a way for interested Americans to visit Japan and physically experience Zen as an everyday practice. Furthermore, she created a site in which they could interact with Japanese people, and provided an opportunity for individuals from both nations to engage in the transmission of culture.

This study will further contribute to academic understanding of the spread of Japanese culture to the West. Manga and anime are not the first cases in which Japan exercised “soft power” in the United States. This trend has been occurring ever since Japan first opened up to the West in the late nineteenth century. It also experienced a particular high point in the twenty years following World War II. In addition to shedding light on some earlier historical examples of this process, my project will also examine some of the “pull factors,” or the reasons why Westerners would choose to embrace Japanese culture. Specifically, I wanted to uncover the daily lives and activities of the Westerners living at Ryosen-an, what motivated these students to study Zen, and how they reacted to the strict routine of monastic practice. I also wished to find out about the Japanese people who worked for the institute, and what compelled them to help them share their religion with non-Asian people.
Content/Methodology of Research:

I conducted research at the Ryosen-an monastery over the course of three weeks. Archival records of the First Zen Institute proved to be very limited. I found some correspondence and copies of a promotional pamphlet, but no financial or personnel records. However, I was very fortunately able to speak with Mrs. Mitsue Fujita, who had worked as a cook for the First Zen Institute during the 1950’s. In perusing the books at the Institute’s library, I also discovered that Ruth Fuller Sasaki had left a prodigious amount of notes in the margins, allowing a glimpse into her opinions on the work of contemporary Zen scholars writing for an American audience.

Correspondence (mostly to “Dear Everybody” at the New York branch of the Institute) and the 1959 pamphlet “The First Zen Institute of American in Japan” reveal much about the lives of the Westerners living there. The subtemple of Ryosen-an grew significantly throughout the 1950s, although it did remain rather small. The institute erected a new zendo and library, and the number of non-Japanese members increased from about 3 or 4 people to about 15 to 20. Most were wealthy and highly educated; the most common profession for Institute members appears to have been university professor. However its most famous attendee, the poet Gary Snyder, was a graduate student from a working class background. As it turns out, not all non-Japanese members were American. Ryosen-an also played host to Zen students from England, the Netherlands, and Egypt. As facilities were small, most had to take lodging off the grounds of Daitoku-ji, sometimes sharing housing. As a result, many were involved in the life of the city of Kyoto. For example, pianist Walter Nowick gave lessons to local girls. Although the Institute did adhere to a strict traditional schedule of meditation including sesshin (week-long periods of intense sitting), they did make some concessions to Western lifestyles, including the installation of electricity and running water in Ryosen-an’s buildings when neither one was very common in postwar Japan. Moreover, Fuller Sasaki became renowned among the group for her dinner parties, in which she offered American dishes that often included such non-Japanese elements as butter and red meat. Letters also make mention of Japanese employees at the Institute who performed tasks such as cooking, gardening, and general maintenance. The carpenter “Wakita-san” appeared to be a particular favorite of Fuller Sasaki’s (despite his strong sake habit), and the whole community grew concerned when he suffered a stroke in 1957. Other Japanese people attended meditation at Ryosen-an as practicing members. Most from this group were professors at local Universities who taught English or specialized in translation, and were therefore familiar with the language.

My conversation with Fujita-sama reflected and confirmed much of what I had read in the correspondence. She was born in the countryside and moved to Kyoto after her parents died (presumably in the war). She attended meditation services at Daitoku-ji, and her roshi suggested she take a job at Ryosen-an. As their cook, she learned how to prepare Western dishes, such as meatloaf, ham, turkey, ice cream, pudding, and a variety of sandwiches and cakes. She herself still speaks no English and said Fuller Sasaki knew only a little conversational Japanese, but communication was never a problem, since they built off their mutual understanding of Zen. While there were some moments of tension – for instance a Japanese gardener was fired because his work was not up to Fuller Sasaki’s standards – for the most part relations between Japanese employees and Western Institute members were cordial, especially since Fuller Sasaki planned garden parties and local excursions that included everyone.
In examining the marginalia of some of the books in the Ryosen-an library, it quickly became apparent that Fuller Sasaki held some disagreements with other Zen advocates, as she frequently wrote “?”s and “!”s, indicating puzzlement or indignation. While she accepted much of D.T. Suzuki’s famous work *Zen and Japanese Culture*, she disagreed with his arguments that one has to embrace poverty to appreciate Zen, and that the Japanese people possess an inherent understanding of the religion. As a Westerner from a wealthy background, neither is surprising, as they would have excluded her personally. Her strongest criticism, however, seems to be reserved for Alan Watts, an English author and coincidentally, her son-in-law. He advocated a more individualized form of Zen practice that required neither strict routine nor formal instruction. Ruth found such ideas to be “nonsense!” insisting that Zen could never fully be learned without proper method and discipline.

**Conclusion/Observation**

This research helped me obtain a better sense of the style of Zen practice in which the Institute engaged. As its goal was to instruct Westerners, it is not surprising that several concessions were made, including the teaching of Zen in English and the serving of Western food. But for the most part, the Institute followed traditional methods of practice, including regular meditation and chanting, and study with a roshi. As Ruth’s criticism of Watts attests, the Institute did not subscribe to the more watered down version of Zen practiced by many Americans stateside as part of the “boom”. Though I could not ascertain from the source material available the exact reasons why Institute members chose to come to Ryosen-an, it was clear that they were very serious students, who wished to experience an authentic aspect of Japanese culture first hand.

Perhaps more importantly, this research paints a picture of a post-Occupation community in which Japanese, Americans, and other English-speaking Westerners interacted on an everyday basis. For many, interpersonal cross-cultural understanding would have been facilitated by the fact that they shared a common language and similarly high levels of education. However, it is also apparent that Japanese employees, who would have come from less privileged backgrounds, were an active and accepted part of the group as well. While most probably became involved due to the simple fact that they needed employment in a harsh postwar economy, its also clear from their connections to Daitoku-ji that they wanted to keep Zen practice alive in Japan at a time when its popularity was waning. Though I suspect there were more instances of friction or verbal misunderstanding than Fujita-sama was willing to relate, it appears from Fuller Sasaki’s discussion of hired help in the letters that they were indeed considered part of the Institute’s “family.” As Fujita-sama described it, language barriers were irrelevant, because everyone at the Institute was able to understand one another through the wordless communication of Zen. In a more secular analysis, they were all united by the common goals of either striving to learn or attempting to preserve what they saw as an invaluable Japanese tradition, against outside forces that might oppose it. Therefore, the First Zen Institute provides an excellent case study of how American interest in Japanese culture helped to further the nations’ alliance beyond the Occupation, outside of governmental efforts, on a highly personal level.