

Bio

Han Sang-yun is M.A. student at the Graduate School of International Cultural Studies, Tohoku University. Her research focuses on the history of modern Japanese religion, especially the relationship between the “Occult Boom” of the 1970s and Japanese esoteric Buddhism.

Title

Occult Entanglements: Esoteric Buddhism, Yoga, and Supernatural Powers in Postwar Japanese Discourse

Abstract

This presentation aims to explore aspects of the reframing process of Esoteric Buddhism, or Mikkyō 密教, in postwar Japan, especially in connection to discourses surrounding Yoga and “supernatural powers” (chōnōryoku 超能力). Due to its “magical characteristics” Mikkyō had, for a long time after the modernization process that took place from the late nineteenth-century, been considered one of the most “superstitious” manifestations of Buddhism. However, with the “supernatural power boom” of the mid-1960s and the “occult boom” of the 1970s, this perspective changed. In 1961, Hayakawa Publishing issued under the title of Chōnōryoku ējento 超能力エージェント (“Supernatural Power Agent”), a Japanese translation of Wild Talent (a.k.a. The Man from Tomorrow), a sci-fi novel by American author Wilson Tucker (1914-2006), originally published in 1954. Besides one of the earliest occurrences of the term chōnōryoku in Japanese, this novel also introduced to the Japanese public parapsychological ideas then popular at the time in North-America. This interested was furthered by yet another cultural phenomenon of the 1970s, namely the translation, in 1973, of The Occult, bestseller by English Author Colin Wilson (1931-2013) originally published in 1971. In this work, Wilson insisted that people could only escape narrowness of the material world by tapping into the subconscious and cultivating psychic powers.

Amidst this cultural context, Japanese Esoteric Buddhists began reconsidering, in connection with this new wave of interest in “supernatural powers,” the “magical characteristics” of their tradition as a positive trait. In this presentation I will pay attention to the developments above, elucidating, at least partly, the process through which Mikkyō intellectuals reframed their image by emphasizing links with Yoga, now highly regarded in the West as an effective training system for the cultivation of one’s latent powers.