

Review

Reviewed Work(s): A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine by John K. Nelson

Review by: Anne C. Kwantes

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 282-283

Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2760794>

Accessed: 02-11-2025 12:03 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Pacific Affairs*, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*

a small minority of intellectuals and social critics, including socialist Kōtoku Shūsui and writer Tokutomi Roka, resisted this notion to no avail.

Overall, the essays collected in this volume should be essential reading for both graduate students preparing for general examinations and researchers interested in pursuing in greater detail the topics they address. Contributions by Bolitho and Vlastos are particularly valuable for delving into the areas all but ignored by English-language historiography. Instructors who wish to assign these essays for undergraduates, however, are advised to exercise some discretion, given their considerable length (ranging from 52 to 90 pages) and the absence of a glossary of Japanese terms.

*Harvard University, U.S.A.*

KYU HYUN KIM

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A SHINTO SHRINE. *By John K. Nelson. Seattle (Washington): University of Washington Press. 1996. x, 286 pp. (B & W photos, index.) US \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 0-295-097499-0; US\$17.50, paper, ISBN 0-295-97500-8.*

THERE ARE FEW WRITINGS ABOUT SHINTO as readable as this book. The approach of the author is as refreshing as the book is new. Though it is difficult to view ancient ritual practice from a contemporary perspective, yet this book does exactly that. Through use of “a variety of narrative techniques” (p. 10) the author has sought to allow his reader to interact with both the objective institutional and the subjective personal dynamics (p. 9) of Japan’s national (not indigenous! [p. 7]) religion.

As the title indicates, the book traces a year’s cycle of shrine activities. The study is based in Nagasaki, southern Japan. Here the author observed fifty-five rituals (p. 9) in one of Shinto’s foremost shrines.

To introduce the setting, a brief synopsis is given of the setting, chief characters and concepts which follow. From the beginning, the author clearly states his thesis that the relevance of Shinto is due, at least in part, to its ability to adapt to the needs of the moment.

The origin of the Suwa Shrine, and how its founding was influenced by Portuguese Roman Catholicism of the sixteenth century, makes for fascinating reading. “Meeting” some of the shrine’s personnel helps the reader appreciate, in the later chapters, that it is flesh-and-blood people who conduct the ceremonies and lead the worship.

Travelling through the calendar year season by season makes for a natural order. Historical vignettes set social, cultural and political factors in place; they are clear, and substantiated by what other scholars have written (pp. 113, 150, 170). Observations of events are lively and personal, so that the reader is given a sense of participation, even at those events where an outsider cannot normally be present (pp. 66–70, 200–03). The use of old tales (pp. 65, 105); the English translations of *norito* (ancient prayers) (pp.

50, 108–11); the accounts of happenings which the author actually observed; interviews and personal comments all serve to convey Nelson's conviction that Shinto, rather than being fossilized, is a fundamental element of contemporary Japanese life. Maps, appendices, extensive notes and a glossary are useful, especially for readers new to Shinto and Japan. However, it would have been easier to visualize the several areas of the temple compound if appendix 2 ("Maps, and Guide to the Shrine Precincts") had been placed in the front of the book, with the other maps.

It seems superfluous to encounter a three-page conclusion at the end of the book. While the author has touched on his thesis of the adaptability and flexibility of Shinto throughout his account, in his conclusion he "ends up in an obligatory waltz with issues of nationalism, ideology, and the social and cultural values of coming generations" (p. 223). This might have been omitted, especially its recommendations, which seem out of place for a foreigner to present, even one who has been permitted to give an "inside" view of much that happened during one year in the life of a Shinto shrine.

The book is highly recommended reading for anyone who is interested in that which takes place in Shinto religious ritual in a contemporary Japanese setting.

*Asian Theological Seminary, Manila, Philippines*

ANNE C. KWANTES

THE KOREAN WAR: Handbook of the Literature and Research. *Edited by Lester H. Brune. Westport (Connecticut): Greenwood Press. 1996. x, 460 pp. (Index.) US\$79.50, cloth. ISBN 0-313-28969-7.*

THIS BOOK contains very useful historiographical essays on recent scholarship dealing with the Korean War. Although the emphasis is on trends in the literature since 1975, many of the essays survey the wider field of cold war historiography since the early postwar era. The articles are balanced and thorough, and although English-language sources predominate, researchers will find references to many books and articles written in Japanese, Korean, Russian and Chinese. The collection as a whole does not present a dominant or overarching re-interpretation of the war; rather it prefers to look at how historical interpretations of the conflict have changed over time.

Editor Lester Brune demonstrates his versatility in this collection, and his contributions include chapters on the origins of the cold war, U.S. policy in Asia and Korea, the United Nations, Canada, the Soviet Union, Congress, McCarthyism, and U.S. Culture and the war. Brune distinguishes between the traditionalist interpretations, the revisionists of the 1960s and 1970s and the more "moderate" synthetic interpretations of the war coming out since 1975. His articles complement other essays written by scholars representing their specific field of expertise. Chen Jian wrote the section on