

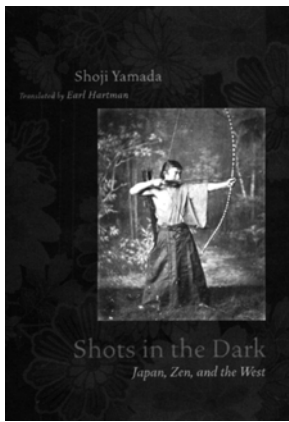
# Shots in the Dark Japan, Zen, and the West

BY YAMADA, SHOJI, TRANSLATED BY EARL HARTMAN

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Reviewed by Eric Cunningham



Shoji Yamada's *Shots in the Dark* is a smart book that offers a new perspective on the thriving project of unmasking false representations of Zen culture. A well-crafted work of clarity and logic, *Shots* challenges the common notion of Zen-as-the-embodiment-of-Japanese essence by historically deconstructing two of Zen's most potent international emblems. The first of these is the long-accepted sagacity of Eugen Herrigel, author of *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the other is the aesthetic perfection of the quintessentially Zen rock garden at Ryōanji temple in Kyoto.

Using accounts from Japanese and Western observers, scholarly literature from the pre- and post-WWII eras, and fascinating photographic evidence, Yamada argues that the reputations of Herrigel as the enlightened Zen archer, and Ryōanji as the timeless pinnacle of Zen gardening, are ultimately inventions of a twentieth-century transnational Zen culture machine that has served the purposes of Western Orientalists and Japanese cultural nationalists alike. This is by no means a new project—writers as diverse as beat guru Alan Watts in the 1950s, and Buddhist scholar Robert Sharf in the 1990s, demonstrated the various ways in which Zen has been misunderstood by under-informed devotees.

What makes this book unique is that the author, a professor of information science, as well as a real practitioner of *kyūdō* (Japanese archery), admits to having zero stake in “properly” interpreting Zen. He writes from the standpoint of the modern academic who seems to think that both Japanese identity and archery can survive well enough without being overlaid with Zen mumbo-jumbo.

The first four chapters, which deal with Herrigel and his “initiation” into the esoteric art of *kyūdō*, show that Herrigel neither attained mastery of Japanese archery, nor likely really knew what his eccentric teacher, Awa Kenzō, was ever talking about. The context of Zen mysticism in which Herrigel's training ostensibly took place was perhaps more a product of Herrigel's fantasy than any design of Awa's. The culminating moment of his training, the *very* “shot in the dark” in which Awa split an arrow in the bulls-eye with a second, perfectly aimed release, was *not* evidence of perfect attunement with the Buddha mind, but most likely an embarrassing mistake that a good archery master would have avoided. Nevertheless, armed with a host of misunder-

standings, Herrigel returned to Germany and spent the remainder of his life enjoying his renown as a true Western Zen master.

The last two chapters are a discursive dig through the history of the rock garden at Ryōanji, showing that this icon of Zen landscaping was not universally considered one of the treasures of Japanese culture prior to World War II. Its status as a “must-see” attraction only developed in the postwar era, closely reflecting Japan's response to the “Zen Boom” in the West created by D.T. Suzuki.

What Yamada argues, in the end, is that Japan's alacrity in appointing Herrigel as an honorary Zen master, to say nothing of its complicity in turning Ryōanji into a national postcard treasure, helped the West reinforce its own image of Japan. The reason for doing this, Yamada points out, was that Japan needed to be validated by the West after the war. This need was so great that it led people who might have

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known better—the custodians of Japanese culture—to allow the West to define Japan on its own terms. Invariably this included hybridized “Zen” terms, despite the fact that most Japanese people do not practice Zen, and most Westerners do not really understand it. Popular Zen is not the essence of Japan, writes Yamada. It is, rather, “a self-generated narcotic that coming into being as a response to the external stress Japan faced after World War II, gave Japan a feeling of euphoria about itself (242).”

*Shots in the Dark* is a great read and is recommended for students who are familiar with Zen and accustomed to dealing with the persistent problems of essentialism, “phony Zen,” invented tradition, and cultural nationalism found throughout the debates on Japan studies. High school and university instructors of Asian survey courses may find it too specific and too critical to serve them well. If the instructor's job is to construct first, and deconstruct later, they will find that Yamada's project moves too swiftly in the direction of myth “dissection,” and students may not understand the purpose behind deflating assumptions they have never had the opportunity to make. ■

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ERIC CUNNINGHAM is Associate Professor of History at Gonzaga University. He received a PhD in Modern Japanese History from the University of Oregon in 2004. A specialist in Japanese intellectual history, he has taught East Asian and World History at Gonzaga University since 2003. Cunningham's research interests include modern Japanese literature, modern Zen Buddhism, Catholicism, psychedelic experience, and eschatology. In addition to a number of articles written on these topics, he is also the author of *Hallucinating the End of History: Nishida, Zen, and the Psychedelic Eschaton* (Academica Press, 2007).