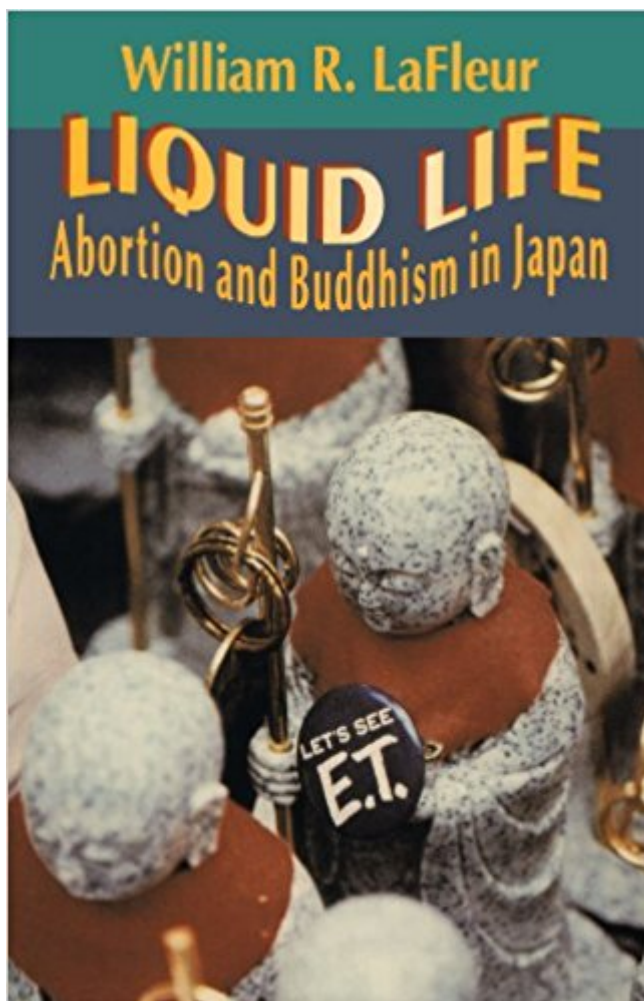


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# Liquid Life: Abortion And Buddhism In Japan



## Synopsis

Why would a country strongly influenced by Buddhism's reverence for life allow legalized, widely used abortion? Equally puzzling to many Westerners is the Japanese practice of mizuko rites, in which the parents of aborted fetuses pray for the well-being of these rejected "lives." In this provocative investigation, William LaFleur examines abortion as a window on the culture and ethics of Japan. At the same time he contributes to the Western debate on abortion, exploring how the Japanese resolve their conflicting emotions privately and avoid the pro-life/pro-choice politics that sharply divide Americans on the issue.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a first-rate cross-cultural study, taking the reader to the heart of another society's beliefs and practices."--Mark Archer, *The Sunday Telegraph*"Both Buddhism and abortion flourish in modern Japan: the link between them is death. William LaFleur explains how this has come about, and in doing so provides an unusual insight into the character of modern Japan, where death is a big-money operation both for medicine and for religion."--Thomas Crump, *London Review of Books*"Objective, informed, observant, and imaginative. William LaFleur not only enlarges our knowledge, he also uses his single topic to illuminate a broad and fundamental feature of Japanese society itself."--Donald Richie, *Japan Times Weekly*

William R. LaFleur is Professor of Japanese and the Joseph B. Glossberg Term Professor of Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania.

This is, of course, a book about Japan and Japanese attitudes toward birth, death and the fragility of life. Because it is also a book about abortion, it also touches on an issue that is incredibly hot in America even as abortion has become an uncontroversial fact of life in most of the rest of the world. So it is a tribute to the author's scholarship as well as to the scope of his world view that he stays true to the business of explaining a Japanese Buddhist take on the world without overtly indulging in taking sides in the American controversy. It's a tribute to his depth of understanding that in spite of this lack of partisanship, this splendid book has something to teach us all and some light to shed on the American debate. It would oversimplify LaFleur's argument to sum it up, but one thread is something like this. The Japanese view of a newborn is that it is a potential life. This view is even more emphatic in the case of an unborn-a foetus. People become people in this view by a gradual process of socialization. Rather than being heartless, this way of looking at things has a great deal to recommend it-especially in days when infant mortality was high. Parents who lost a new-born or an unborn child could pray for the return of that child in a subsequent pregnancy. The ritual system, which provided no funeral for one who died so young, affirmed the tentative nature of the dead one's membership in the human community. If it takes socialization to make a human and a family to make socialization, then it is also up to the community and the family to decide if that's going to happen at all. In this view, life in infancy is a liquid that hardens into individuality with time. So infant death and miscarriage are sad, but not final. The unborn child gets to come around again, maybe with better karma. This, of course, removes abortion from the realm of murder/choice. It also forces all of us to see our various positions in the American debate as products of our social and religious assumptions just as the Japanese view is the product of theirs. Again, this is not a book about the American abortion wars. It is instead, a splendid book about Japanese religious beliefs across a swath of history and how they affect attitudes. By staying true to his topic, LaFleur teaches us a great deal.--Lynn Hoffman, author of THE NEW SHORT COURSE IN WINE and the forthcoming novel bang BANG from Kunati Books. ISBN 9781601640005

William R. LaFleur gives us a book which is well made. Piece by piece Mr. LaFleur goes over the history of abortion, buddhism, family planning, sexuality attitudes and even woman's lib in Japan. By the time he reaches his conclusion, you can't help but feel like you, yourself, have also researched and processed all the information. Near the end, when he compares the Japanese ideas to American ideas on the issue, you can't help but feel that maybe it was all a well placed trap, to get you to look at the whole mess from a different point of view, not just the pro-life/pro-choice,

good/bad, yes/no, on/off American way (where every issue only has two sides and the winner gets total victory, so no mercy!) You might not like some of the points made, but it will surely force you to think.

I read this book over two years ago and yet I still find myself thinking about the more abstract ideas found in the book. If you are looking for a book to give you a good general overview and differing points of view then this is the book for you.

Excellent book for both pro-life and pro-choice "activists," and those interested in the issue. And you can learn more about Buddhism as a bonus!

Great condition

I can heartily recommend this book. I once took a course taught by LaFleur which was one of the best courses on understanding Japanese Buddhism and the practice of abortion. This book matches his good lecturing style. What is interesting is that in the West abortion is viewed in primarily negative terms, as is infanticide. LaFleur's initial attitude was: How can Japanese engage in this kind of activity on such a large scale? What role does belief in reincarnation (according to Buddhism) play? Rather than bringing in Western moral preconceptions that might prejudice his discussion, LaFleur treats this sensitive topic with great insight and sensitivity. This book will be a very interesting read for those interested in Japanese society and Buddhism.

Liquid Life is an intriguing look at abortion in modern day Japan. The argument is well formulated and the publication is well researched. Liquid Life is an excellent read. Those attempting to understand Japan MUST comprehend the abortion issue in the country today. \*\*\*\*\*

recommended reading for graduate students in public health, medicine, theology, law. Students like it and incorporate it well into class discussions.

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