Abstract Submission for Water Conference (Individual Paper Proposal)
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“Water as a Symbolic Resource: Japanese Buddhist Ethical Reasoning on Abortion”

This paper uses William R. LaFleur’s work\(^1\) to explain how Japanese Buddhists use water imagery in their ethical reasoning regarding abortion. His work is very interdisciplinary with historical, philosophical, literary, political, anthropological, psychological, artistic, and religious dimensions.

Debate in the U.S. often assumes that the answer to the abortion debate hinges on finding an adequate definition of life, pinpointing when life begins. Japanese Buddhists, however, are skeptical that such large issues can be resolved through definitional exactitude. Instead, they turn to ritual, which better allows for ambivalence and complexity. Their rituals not only employ plentiful symbolism involving water but their reasoning also draws on water’s qualities, such as fluidity, softness, and the ability to take shape in relation to the environment.

While often religions associate water symbolism positively with creation and a divine sanctioning of fertility, Buddhism is distinctive in that initially it disconnected religion from fecundity and lacked water symbolism. For example, in Buddhism there is no creator God who creates the world from a watery deep, waters the barren earth, or commands us to be fruitful and multiply. Over time, however, water symbolism does enter the Buddhist system as Buddhism absorbs elements of folk religion, yet water is associated not only with life but also with death and the otherworld. Combined with belief in rebirth, this enables water to be a bridge between death and potential new life.

In Japan, a miscarried, stillborn, or aborted child is known as a *mizuko*, or “child of the waters.” This term is traced to Japanese cosmogonic myths according to which ancestor gods, when unable to keep children, return them to the sea. The language of water-child and “return” to waters was drawn on when infants died or fetuses were aborted, affecting how the fate of the being was imagined.

In Japanese culture, birth and death are extensively socialized ritually. The line from living to dead is not sharp, nor a matter of mere biology. There is a long series of rituals at various intervals after death and birth, conferring a sense of gradual transition envisioned in terms of densification and dissolving. Life and its borders are fluid and “liquid.”

\(^1\) I will focus on his *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*, Princeton University Press, 1992.
The bodhisattva Jizo is known for concern for women and children and assisting those suffering in undesirable rebirth realms. In particular, he is depicted in the mythological Riverbank in the Land of Sai, a limbo for stillborn, miscarried, and aborted infants and deceased children. In Japanese cemeteries or in deserted, isolated places, apology rites involve placing stones to look like this imagined river, each stone representing a departed or prevented infant.

These water-relevant examples and others will be explained in more depth and historically contextualized, with an eye to their influence on Japanese Buddhist moral reasoning and healing practices. LaFleur’s claim is that ritual “can operate with considerable effect and power in the realm of morals” and has done so “rather brilliantly” in Japanese Buddhism. (15)