

Zeitschrift:	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band:	52 (1998)
Heft:	4
Artikel:	Buddhist and Daoist mysticism in Kôda Rohan's works
Autor:	Donath, Diana
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147437

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

BUDDHIST AND DAOIST MYSTICISM IN KÔDA ROHAN'S WORKS

Diana Donath, Köln¹

Although the well-known Meiji author Kôda Rohan 幸田露伴 (1867-1947) made several successful attempts to join Realism as the main literary trend of his time, the vast majority of his work has to be assigned to the current of Literary Idealism, which means in his case Neoromaniticism and, strictly speaking, Romantic Mysticism.

Japanese literature experts classify Rohan, and particularly his important early work, as belonging to Early Romanticism (*shoki-rômanshugi* 初期浪漫主義). They stress the visionary character² of his statements, and they use the special term Literature of Enlightenment (*godô no bungaku* 悟道の文学)³ to describe parts of Rohan's body of work, a term which, as one of the following examples will demonstrate, is quite appropriate.

Rohan looked at himself as a Realist writer, though. He wrote: "Prose (*shôsetsu*) is fiction, but good prose consists of the collected shadows of reality."⁴ Rohan, who himself was an individual in every regard, resisted classification in literary categories, and called his literary principle "the

1 A shortened version of this essay served as a model for my paper of the same title held at the 8th Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS) in Budapest, Aug. 27-30, 1997.

2 E.g. Kawamura Jirô 川村二朗 (in "Kansatsu kara genshi e: Kôda Rohan ron", in: *Nihon-bungaku-kenkyûshiryô-kankôkai* (ed.): *Kôda Rohan / Higuchi Ichiyô*, Yûseidô 1982, 3. ed. 1987, pp. 16 and 20) says: "Rohan looks at the world realistically, but he advances to vision ... He describes current affairs realistically, but he leads the reader into a space of free imagination ... into the dimension of infinity ... into the sensation of bodylessness."

3 E.g. Sasabuchi Yûichi 笹淵友一, quoted by Ikari Akira 伊狩竜, *Kôda Rohan to Higuchi Ichiyô*, Kyôiku-shuppan-sentâ 1983/1, pp. 148.

4 In his article "Kakusha-zappitsu" (in *Yomiuri-shinbun* 1890/2), quoted by Sugizaki Toshio 杉岐俊夫, "Fûryûbutsu-shiron", in: *Taishô-daigaku kenkyû-kiyô* 61, 1975/11, p. 359.

description of the interesting" or of "the inspiring" (*kankyōshugi* 感興主義).⁵

Throughout his whole life, Rohan was looking for the truth behind appearances. His intended aim was to transcend the borders of the narrow, petty, and limited real world and to advance into the universal and the eternal. Particularly in the endings of his novels, his plot often leaves the realm of realism and ends in a seemingly fairytale-like and fantastic miracle, which is full of symbolic and philosophical meaning. In this regard, Rohan is a master of employing nearly imperceptible transitions from realism and everyday-life into fantasy and mystery.

In many cases Rohan's mysticism has religious and philosophical roots: it is sometimes based on or combined with Buddhist or especially Zen-Buddhist themes, and in many other cases it incorporates Daoist thinking. In terms of *Buddhism*, Rohan received a strongly Buddhist education, and deepened his knowledge of philosophical Buddhism through extensive studies of the sūtras.⁶ Also, despite the fact that his family, which had belonged to the Nichiren-sect for centuries, converted to Protestant Christianity (by 1889) when Rohan was nineteen years old, and that Rohan married a Christian intellectual⁷ in his second marriage (in 1912) and accepted a Christian church wedding ceremony,⁸ Rohan himself remained a Buddhist and practiced *Zazen* throughout his life.⁹ Many of his

5 Quotations from Katanuma Seiji 潟沼誠二, "Kôda Rohan kenkyû josetu: Shoki sakuhin o kaidoko suru", Ôfûsha 1989 p. 129.

6 Apart from the Lotos-Sûtra (*Hokkekyô*, Skr. *Saddharma-pundarîka-sûtra*) and the group of the Prajñâpâramitâ-Sûtras (esp. the Diamond-Sûtra *Kongôkyô*, Skr. *Vajracchedikâ-prajñâpâramitâ-sûtra*, and the Heart-Sûtra *Hannyashingyô*, Skr. *Prajñâpâramitâ-hṛdaya-sûtra*), these were especially the *Kegonkyô* (Skr. *Avatarasaka-sûtra*) and the *Ryôgonkyô* (Skr. *Śûraṅgama-sûtra*). Rohan wrote a commentary on the *Hannyashingyô* titled "Hannyashingyô daini-gichû" in 1890. - See Diana Donath, "Kôda Rohan und sein repräsentatives Frühwerk Fûryûbutsu - Ein Beitrag zur Rohan-Forschung", ed. Dieter Born, Bonn 1997, pp. 54, with notes on further literature.

7 Kodama Yayoko 児玉八世子, app. 1872-1945.

8 By the famous Protestant preacher Uemura Masahisa 植村正久 (1857-1925), professor at Meiji-gakuin, minister, founder of several churches etc.

9 See D. Donath, "Kôda Rohan", p. 28 and p. 33.

novels deal with Buddhist themes, as sometimes hinted at in such titles as *Isâna's Garden* (*Isâna no sono* 伊舍那の園, 1915), *Prakrtî* (*Purakurichi* プラクリチ, 1932),¹⁰ and others.

But Rohan was also one of the most reputable Meiji experts on *Daoism*. He was a very knowledgeable *kangakusha*, and had a special affection for his large neighbouring country China and its culture, and particularly Chinese Daoism matched his own inclination towards mysticism. In his extensive studies he devoted attention to the Daoist classics and standard works,¹¹ which was unusual at the time. Japanese literature experts call Rohan "a pioneer who japonised Chinese Daoism."¹² There are many novels and scientific or semi-scientific works of his which have titles containing the word Daoism itself,¹³ the names of well-known Chinese Daoist saints¹⁴ or the term "saint" (*sennin* 仙人)¹⁵, or Daoist keywords like "mystic" (*gen* 幻), "dark" (*yû* 幽), or "strange" (*kai* 怪).¹⁶

A few examples may illustrate the synthesis of Rohan's mysticism with *Buddhist thought*. The novel *Clay Doll, Wooden Doll* (*Dogû-mokugû* 土偶木偶, 1905)¹⁷ is one example, being based on the Indian-Buddhist conception of the circle of rebirths (Skr. *samsâra*). Rohan expresses his conviction in the existence of intuitive memories where it is possible to recall a former existence: for a few short moments, with the flashing of one's conscience, or as a *déjà-vue* experience, or with the eerie sensation of a delicate touch from a different world. The plot describes dreamlike events. The protagonist, called *Gen'ichirô* 幻一郎 (the name containing

10 See D. Donath, *ibid.*, p. 89 resp. p. 93; with notes on further literature.

11 As Laozi, Zhuangzi, Liezi, Hanfeizi, Guiguzi, Baopuzi, Lü Buwei, and many others. See D. Donath, *ibid.*, p. 25 fn. 54.

12 See Ikari Akira, *Kôda Rohan to Higuchi Ichiyô*, p. 88.

13 E.g. *Dôkyô ni tsuite* (1933), *Dôkyô-shisô* (1936). For these and the following titles see D. Donath, "Kôda Rohan", p. 94.

14 Like Rodôhin (Lü Dongbin; in *Sennin Rodôhin*, 1922), Hakukeshi (Bai Jiezi; in *Hakukeshi-kukô*, 1921), Ôgaifû (Wang Haifeng; in *Katsushinin Ôgaifû*, 1926), and others.

15 E.g. *Sennin no hanashi* (1922), and others.

16 E.g. *Gendan* (1938), *Yûhiki* (1925), *Yûgendô-zappitsu* (appr. 1883-1887), *Kaidan* (1928), and others.

17 See D. Donath, "Kôda Rohan", pp. 85; with notes on further literature.

the above mentioned Daoist term “mystic” *gen*), reaches the surroundings of Kyôto in an aimless journey and visits an antique store. He buys the old fragment of a letter, which is attached to a lady’s kimono cloth. Back at his inn, he tries to read the faded script of the letter, but a fire suddenly breaks out and the letter burns. Sensing this letter to have been a message from his former life, Gen’ichirô is paralysed with shock. He moves on, and in the dark of night runs into a woman who asks for help against her pursuers. He takes up the fight, only to be defeated and hit unconscious. When he awakes, the woman takes him to her home, where the furniture, as well as the woman herself and her servant, seem increasingly familiar to him. Finally, he realizes that this is his own home from a former existence, and that the lady is his former geisha-mistress who had been separated from him before their planned wedding. She is also the writer of the burned letter. Her identity is proved by a birthmark on her left ring finger.¹⁸ The geisha, obviously the clay doll referred to in the title, promises him a reunion in their next life.¹⁹

The next morning, the house has disappeared and Gen’ichirô awakes in a meadow under a tree. A shabbily dressed girl, who is deaf and dumb but the image of his former love, looks at him. Obviously the wooden doll, she has the same birthmark. He takes her back to Tôkyô as his wife; and she recovers from her deaf-muteness. One day, however, they leave their house together never to return.

In an epilogue, Rohan explains in the form of the protagonist’s I-narration that the girl’s deaf-muteness indicates a half-clear state of consciousness, which is a result of the grief of her former life, which the geisha had ended by committing suicide after being separated from Gen’ichirô. Rohan explains his notion that the three worlds (the past, the present and the future) do not take place one after another, but exist next to each other as parallel worlds, whose borders are permeable for parapsychologically gifted people. Rohan uses the Buddhist terms “three worlds” (*sanze* 三世; Skr. *triloka*) and “three spheres” (*sangai* 三界; Skr. *traidhâtuka*), which depict the circle of rebirths. In Japan, according to the popular Buddhist view, these terms contain the “three ages” present, past and

18 Here we can see Rohan’s influence on Mishima, who makes this motive the basic idea of his novel-tetralogy *Hôjô no umi*.

19 A well-known *topos* in Japanese literature.

future. But of course Rohan knew the original Buddhist meanings of the three worlds or spheres as “the sphere of desires” (Skr. *kāmadhātu*), “the sphere of forms” (Skr. *rūpadhātu*), and “the sphere of formlessness” (Skr. *arūpadhātu*); and in the case of these “three worlds” no temporal order is to be assumed. Therefore, Rohan understands the “three ages” as being parallel, and hence questions the idea of time itself. Such philosophical thoughts as these are also addressed in other works of his.

Rohan further incorporates Buddhist thought, in this case Zen-Buddhist thought, in his novel *The Contemplation of a Picture* (*Kangadan* 観画談).²⁰ Rohan, who was fifty-eight years old at the time, succeeds in depicting a doubled and enhanced experience of enlightenment, that means an enlightenment in two steps. The protagonist nicknamed “Master Late Bloomer” Taikibansei-sensei 待機晩成先生, after having worked hard and saved money for many years, takes up his planned and much longed-for studies, which ultimately, however, cause him to have a mental crisis. Seeking recovery, he sets out on a hiking tour in the mountains, and during a fierce rain, he spends a night in a remote mountain temple. At the sound of the falling rain he realizes that this monotonous roaring contains all sounds in the world, including men’s and animals’ voices as well as those mechanically produced, all sounds audible once and now. This intuitive experience of entity fills him with joy and relief, and he falls asleep.

After being awoken, he is brought to a hut higher in the mountains to escape the rising flood of the rain. In the hut, he finds a large painting covering a whole wall, which depicts an idyllic landscape: a city surrounded by mountains, with a river running through it, and with houses and people (perhaps a symbol of paradise, as the depiction of Heavenly Jerusalem in Christianity). He immerses himself into the picture by meditation and goes into it – a way that is common in East Asian painting – and the picture then begins to live. He hears the ferryman cry out “The last call”, but before he can answer, the candle in the hut flickers in a draft of cold air, and the lively scene becomes inanimate and turns into a flat painting again. For one brief moment, which contained the essence of his whole existence, he had access to eternity. Through this experience of enlightenment, he recovers mentally and later on, living as a simple farmer, achieves a state of

20 See D. Donath, “Kôda Rohan”, p. 93; with notes on further literature.

calmness in which it no longer matters to him whether his talents bloom late in life or don't bloom at all.

This spontaneous and brief Zen-Buddhist enlightenment occurs in two steps: at first partially, appealing to the sense of hearing and caused by a weather phenomenon. Then, it takes place on a higher level (figuratively shown, as a place higher in the mountains), appealing to the visual sense and caused by a work of art. This conforms to the traditional value system which places seeing above hearing and art above nature. His return to life as a farmer is equivalent to the Zen-Buddhist thesis²¹ that, after the experience of enlightenment, it is possible to renounce entry into Nirvâna, and instead to return to everyday-life and to be able to repeat the experiences of enlightenment.

As a third example of Rohan's Buddhist founded mysticism I would like to refer to his early work *Fûryûbutsu* 風流佛 (1889),²² which I have interpreted as *The Kannon Statue Created out of Love*. The novel, which I have translated into German, describes how the young wood carver Shuun 珠運 awakes to love, but is jilted by his beloved. It takes Shuun months of suffering before he is able to transform his pain into creative energy. And then he creates a statue of the Kannon goddess as a naked image of his beloved, and through his strong mental energy he brings the statue to a mystic life, where it seems to speak and move. When Shuun hears that his beloved is going to marry a rich nobleman and will be lost to him forever, he tries to free himself from his unbreakable love by smashing the statue as his beloved's portrait. But he isn't capable of doing so, and tumbles to the floor. At this moment a miracle occurs: the girl appears, embracing him, and he then envisions walking hand in hand with her in a heavenly wedding ceremony above the clouds. The model for this miracle, which surfaces from the earth, is obviously the well-known treasure-pagoda, depicted in the Lotos-Sûtra:²³ the treasure-pagoda surfaces from the earth,

21 As it is expressed in the well-known parable of "Taming the Beef".

22 See D. Donath, "Kôda Rohan"; notes on further literature see p. 98 fn. 1; translation of the novel pp. 251-328.

23 Chapter 21; see the translation of the Sûtra by Margareta von Borsig, *Lotos-Sûtra*, ed. Lambert Schneider, Gerlingen 1992, pp. 333.

with a pair²⁴ sitting inside, consisting of the historical Buddha Śâkyamuni (who corresponds to the sun), and the so-called “Many-Treasure-Buddha” *Tahô* 多宝 (Skr. *Prabhûtaratna*; who corresponds to the moon). This correspondence to the sun and the moon refers to the pair of yin-yang (*inyô* 陰陽).²⁵ This duality is symbolic of the fact that in the end of the novel Shuun and his beloved mystically emerge as a pair, defying and overcoming reality, where they remain separated.

In the epilogue of the novel the Buddhist ideology is shown even more distinctly: the carved Kannon statue, endowed with magic and religious energy, now starts her activity as a goddess. She is depicted naked, but according to the statement of the Kannon’s thirty-three bodies in the Lotos-Sûtra,²⁶ every worshipper can see her in the clothing that matches their own social status and local customs. This means that anyone can address her, and that she is available for everybody. This also alludes to the Buddhist way of visualizing the goddess through meditation.

Typical for Rohan, who is known for his syncretism, is the ironic combination of a Buddhist subject with Daoist adornment: the Kannon goddess, while exercising her religious and magical power, is standing on a white cloud, which is a prominent Daoist symbol.²⁷

Concerning *Daoist mysticism* in Rohan’s works, there are numerous examples, for Daoist influenced works run through Rohan’s creative time virtually from the first to the last work. Rohan’s first preserved work (written between 1883 and 1887) with the title *Mystery of the Magic Square* (*Hôjin hisetsu* 方陣秘說)²⁸ is based on the Daoist magic of the

24 In Buddhist iconography with its eminent predominance of triads, a portrayal of a couple is very rare.

25 This means that *Tahô* can be interpreted as a woman.

26 Chapter 25; see the translation by M. v. Borsig, *Lotos-Sûtra*, pp. 364; see D. Donath, “Kôda Rohan”, p. 328 fn. 249. – Among the thirty-three bodies of the Kannon the Lotos-Sûtra also lists her body as a Buddha, hence the term “Buddha” (*butsu*) in the title of the novel is not incorrect for the Bodhisattva (*bosatsu*) Kannon (Skr. *Avalokiteśvara*).

27 Originally it was a sign of the victory of Daoism over Buddhism at the prosecution of Buddhists in China in 845. The main Daoist shrines in Chinese cities are often named *Baiyunguan* 白雲觀 after the White Cloud (Chin. *baiyun*, Jap. *byakuun*).

28 See D. Donath, “Kôda Rohan”, p. 48; with notes on further literature.

number square and culminates in interesting philosophical speculations on the phenomena “number” (*sû*) and “time”, as well as on number cycles and cyclic systems, as the regeneration cycle of nature, or chemical cycles, especially the Daoist alchemy experiments for prolonging life. Rohan speculates on everyone’s span of life as his fate, and raises the question of reciprocal influence of man’s willpower and fate, a question which he also asks in many of his later novels. He also discusses the existence of a highest will determining fate, which allows, particularly under the new influence of Christian thought, the assumption of a highest being; but this is later depersonified and conceived similar to the Daoist and Neoconfucian concept of the “Utter Extreme” (Chin. *taiji* 太極).

One of Rohan’s last works is a Daoist philosophical study under the title *The Saint’s Book Cantongqi* (*Sensho-Sandôkei* 仙書參同契, 1941),²⁹ dealing with a Chinese Han-time commentary on the ancient *Book of Oracles*, *Yijing* (Jap. *Shûeki* 周易). The book *Cantongqi*, to which Rohan’s attention was probably drawn through Zhu Xi (Shushi) and the commentary on it, is assigned to the Chinese author Wei Boyang 委伯陽 (active appr. 147-167). In this study Rohan gives an outline of elements and development of religious Daoism. Rohan, who had an especially good knowledge of chemistry,³⁰ also introduces the two different concepts of alchemy for the production of an elixir for immortality, named “Outer Vermilion” (Chin. *waidan* 外丹) and “Inner Vermilion” (Chin. *neidan* 內丹). It is Rohan’s speciality that he sees both concepts as an entity with the aim of achieving a mental condition similar to Buddhist enlightenment, a kind of prenatal state in which all contradictions, even between life and death, are overcome, and one can recognize or experience the all-dominating “Utter Extreme” (*taiji*; see above).

These two studies by Rohan, which mark the beginning and nearly the end of his literary work, are not fictional prose, but are in themselves highly interesting as condensed abstracts of his Daoist mystic thought.

The dual way of thinking of the Daoist yin-yang concept is very well transformed in Rohan’s novel, *The New Urashima Tarô* (*Shin-Urashima* 新浦島, 1895).³¹ Rohan’s interest in this popular Japanese fairy-tale is

29 See D. Donath, *ibid.*, p. 95; with notes on further literature.

30 See D. Donath, *ibid.*, p. 26 and p. 54.

31 See D. Donath, *ibid.*, p. 77 and fn. 222; with notes on further literature.

attracted once more by the question of the phenomenon of time and the conception of parallel worlds: While Urashima Tarô spends a seemingly short span of time in a mystical parallel world – the magical realm of the Dragon King's daughter, either on the bottom of the sea or on a remote island – at the same time in the human world a much longer period of time has passed. The thesis that time can pass in different speeds, not only in subjective psychological understanding, but according to objective and exact measuring methods, corresponds to new scientific insights that in the universe next to a so-called "black hole" the measurable time definitely passes more quickly than far from it.

Rohan creates an amazing continuation of the fairy-tale: The protagonist Jirô, explained as the hundredth descendant of Urashima Tarô's brother and living in modern Meiji time, receives the treasure box handed down from Urashima Tarô from his parents. When Jirô opens it without permission, he himself remains unharmed, but his parents suddenly die. At the funeral their bodies have vanished. Left behind is a jewel in each coffin, one white and one red, symbols for yin and yang. Jirô uses them as oracles in the manner of the *Yijing*: he asks the oracle some questions, and the white jewel Yin³² indicates the answer "No", the red jewel Yang means the answer "Yes". On his last question, whether he, Jirô, can succeed in becoming a Daoist saint, the answer is "No". Disappointed, but not willing to give up, Jirô makes use of several esoteric rituals from Daoism and from Shingon Buddhism,³³ in order to equip himself with a magical force.

Here Rohan integrates two important international motives: the motive of the pact with the devil, upon which Goethe's *Faust* is based, and the

32 The colour white symbolizes the cold light of the moon (yin), the colour red the fireball of the sun (yang; see the depiction of the sun on the Japanese national flag). In iconographical depictions of the sun and the full moon as a red and a white disc, e.g. on Chinese stone carvings (as in the Buddhist caves of Beishan moya zaoxiang at Dazu, Province of Sichuan), the red circle, originally filled with vermillion, has coloured black through oxidation. Because of this ironically the dark circle is to be understood as yang (light), and the bright circle as yin (shadow).

33 E.g. a Shingon Buddhist ritual is the incessantly repeated recitation of magical formulas (jap. *shingon*, Skr. *mantra* resp. *dhârañî*).

motive of the double. With great effort, Jirô manages to visualize the Demon King or Satan from within himself, that means he makes him appear. In response to Jirô's request for help, the Demon King splits him into two halves. From this point on Jirô has a double called "Same Kind" Dôshu 同種, who is an omnipotent servant for him. This servant, as his evil, devilish part, fulfills all his wishes for luxury and sex through brutality and crime. Jirô, as his good, human part, is plagued by his conscience and gives Dôshu the last order: to petrify him.

In Rohan's novel the contrast between good and bad, as established in the yin-yang-principle, is applied to the divided soul of man, and, with a literary description of schizophrenia, it is drawn close to modern psychiatry. In this novel, Daoist and Shingon-Buddhist mysticism is combined with the Buddhist theory of causality (that means the idea of guilt) and the demand that Buddhism's main evil "greed" (Skr. *trṣṇā*) – the striving for posession and sex – has to be extinguished, which happens in this case through petrification, that means the killing of all desires.

I hope these examples have shown to what extent Rohan's abundant literary fantasy with its inclination towards Romantic Mysticism is rooted in East Asian thought.