



# Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan

## (Twentieth Century Japan: The Emergence of a World Power)

*Helen Hardacre*

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Helen Hardacre provides new insights into the spiritual and cultural dimensions of abortion debates around the world in this careful examination of *mizuko kuyo*—a Japanese religious ritual for aborted fetuses. Popularized during the 1970s, when religious entrepreneurs published frightening accounts of fetal wrath and spirit attacks, *mizuko kuyo* offers ritual atonement for women who, sometimes decades previously, chose to have abortions. As she explores the complex issues that surround this practice, Hardacre takes into account the history of Japanese attitudes toward abortion, the development of abortion rituals, the marketing of religion, and the nature of power relations in intercourse, contraception, and abortion.

Although abortion in Japan is accepted and legal and was commonly used as birth control in the early postwar period, entrepreneurs used images from fetal photography to mount a surprisingly successful tabloid campaign to promote *mizuko kuyo*. Enthusiastically adopted by some religionists as an economic strategy, it was soundly rejected by others on doctrinal, humanistic, and feminist grounds.

In four field studies in different parts of the country, Helen Hardacre observed contemporary examples of *mizuko kuyo* as it is practiced in Buddhism, Shinto, and the new religions. She also analyzed historical texts and contemporary personal accounts of abortion by women and their male partners and conducted interviews with practitioners to explore how a commercialized ritual form like *mizuko kuyo* can be marketed through popular culture and manipulated by the same forces at work in the selling of any commodity. Her conclusions reflect upon the deep current of misogyny and sexism running through these rites and through feto-centric discourse in general.



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