**SOULS OF ZEN – Buddhism, Ancestors, and the 2011 Tsunami in Japan**

A film by Tim Graf & Jakob Montrasio

**Synopsis (short)**

This documentary presents perspectives on Buddhism in the midst of Japan’s recovery from the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. Souls of Zen explores the role of Buddhism in care for the 3/11 bereaved and the dead based on attention to the everyday lives of Buddhist professionals in the disaster zone. Shot from March to December 2011 with a focus on Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, the film captures Buddhist temples and local communities in their struggles to rebuild. By contextualizing the triple disaster within recent rapid transformations in Buddhism and Japan’s enduring tradition of ancestor veneration, Souls of Zen reflects on the complex role of Buddhism in a society shaped by natural disasters, religious pluralism, and demographic change.

**Goals for the screening at Carleton College**

This public screening aims to raise awareness of the importance to discuss Japan’s ongoing recovery from the March 11, 2011 disasters. With the 3/11 anniversary approaching, students and journalists might ask scholars about the situation in Japan today. We intend to show the new documentary Souls of Zen on the occasion of this anniversary. Inquiring students and reporters may be invited to attend the screening and discussion. The event could furthermore be held in association with locally organized projects and fund-raising activities for disaster victims.

Our goal is to discuss the ongoing problems in Northeast Japan with leading scholars of religion. The opportunity to screen and discuss Souls of Zen at Carleton College promises to contribute to the research on religious responses to the triple disaster. This discussion might furthermore play a fruitful role in dealing with future catastrophes.
Synopsis (extended)

The documentary “Souls of Zen – Buddhism, Ancestors, and the 2011 Tsunami in Japan” presents perspectives on Buddhism as practiced by clergy, lay adherents, and families in Japan by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on the daily life of Buddhist temples, monastic education, prayer practice, mortuary rituals, and Japan’s tradition of ancestor veneration in the wake of 3/11. From March to December 2011, Tim Graf and Jakob Montrasio filmed invaluable footage of the greatest religious mobilization in Japan’s postwar history. This film is the only documentary based on sustained attention to the everyday lives of Buddhist professionals in the disaster zone.

In an ethnographic journey from Tokyo to the hardest-hit prefectures (among other regions in Japan) Souls of Zen covers insights and opinions from scholars, clergy, and lay adherents with a focus on Soto Zen and Jodo Pure Land Buddhism. The filmmakers visited rural graveyards, urban temples, modern funeral halls, prayer monasteries, and public festivals to deliver a detailed account on Buddhism in the midst of Japan’s recovery from the triple disasters.

The unfamiliar institutional, doctrinal, and psychological challenges Buddhist clergy are facing in the wake of 3/11 form a focal point of the film. These challenges will be discussed in context of long-standing Buddhist traditions, ritual innovations, and religious responses to the March 11, 2011 disaster in Japan. The film intends to re-evaluate the complex role of Buddhism in a society struggling with the sudden impact of catastrophic disasters that exacerbate and otherwise alter continuing dilemmas occasioned by demographic change and religious pluralism.

Versions available for screening

Full version: 89 minutes.

Shortened conference version: 70 minutes.
**Past screenings**

Film Festival Max Ophüls Preis (January 23/25, 2013, Saarbrücken, Germany).

Salvage and Salvation: Religion, Disaster Relief, and Reconstruction in Asia (conference version; November 21, 2012, National University of Singapore).


Warsaw Film Festival (October 12/15/18/21, 2012, Warsaw, Poland).

t.h.i.s. Buddhist Film Festival (September 22, 2012, Singapore).

Zurich Film Festival (September 21/22/27, 2012, Zurich, Switzerland).

**Biographies**

**Director, producer, editor and writer Tim Graf** is a Research Associate at the Institute of Religious Studies and the Collaborative Research Centre “Ritual Dynamics” at Heidelberg University. His research interests focus on transformations of Buddhism in contemporary Japan and more broadly deal with the interplay of religious practice and modern social change. He published several articles on changes in Japanese funerary practices and conducted fieldwork on Zen Buddhist prayer temples as a JSPS fellow at the University of Tokyo.

The idea of complementing his dissertation project with a documentary film by implementing methods of visual ethnography is inspired by Tim’s interest in new approaches of “Material Religion.” As a result, he started cooperating with friend and cinematographer Jakob Montrasio in 2010. Jakob and Tim had planned to deliver a documentary about Zen Buddhist prayer monasteries. However, after March 11, their documentary project turned more and more into a film about Buddhist responses to the largest natural and nuclear disaster in Japan’s recorded history.

Besides capturing rituals and events throughout the year 2011, Tim was accompanied by Jakob and Rüdiger Wolff for the main shoot in summer. Equipped with cameras, lenses, lights
and sound gear provided by m&r Kreativ, the film crew spent several weeks together in Japan and again for the post-production in Germany.

**Director, editor and cinematographer Jakob Montrasio** has been surrounded by art from young, in the form of writings, music, paintings and finally films. Watching the film Blues Brothers at the tender age of 10 further spiked Jakob’s interest into films. From then on, using his father’s camcorder, he’d spend hours shooting stop-motion pieces using nothing but Lego.

In 1998, Jakob submitted a short film with a digital spider to a national festival and won a small prize, which threw him onto the track of filmmaking. What followed were internships with photographers and an apprenticeship in Frankfurt focusing on Media Design, where he learned the tools of the trade – from image manipulation over camera aperture to 3D animation.

After visiting the Festival de Cannes in 2005, Jakob moved to Shanghai, China, and started to shoot. Within five years, Jakob not only worked for high profile clients such as Porsche, Dell and Microsoft, but also managed to open his own production company, MK Media Productions, write three feature film scripts, work on the big budget production John Rabe in the visual effect crew, and shoot his first feature film – Shangdown – The Way of the Spur. He is now living in Saarbrücken, Germany, with his wife Sijia and daughter Emily.

**Online references**

Film trailer
http://youtu.be/tMHzautG-VY

Website
http://www.soulsofzen.com/

Facebook
http://www.facebook.com/SoulsOfZen