



Sherry D. Fowler, *Murōji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple*

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MURŌJI, THE BUDDHIST TEMPLE named for Mt. Murō where it is located, is now affiliated with the Shingon sect of Buddhism. It is famous as the Nyōnin Kōya, “Mt. Kōya for women,” since it allowed access to women during the pre-Meiji period when they could not enter the precincts of Mt. Kōya. The temple is of prime importance both historically and artistically, being the site of a number of ninth- and tenth-century buildings and images that have been classified as National Treasures and Important Cultural Objects.

According to legend the temple was founded by Kūkai and is the place where he buried the wish-fulfilling jewel bestowed on him by his Chinese master, Hui Guo. Kūkai wrote that the jewel buried on Mt. Murō marks the centre of Japan, conceived as an immense single-prong *vajra*, and predicted that as long as the jewel remains hidden Buddhism, or at least its esoteric form, will continue to exist in Japan. The jewel on Mt. Murō is the focus of the Latter Seven Day Ritual (*shichi-nichi-mishu-hō*), inaugurated by Kūkai in the ninth century and performed annually by Shingon priests for the protection of the country and the emperor. Murōji is also the place where Kūkai ritually subdued the Nāga King Zennyō, who was deemed to control the rainfall for all Japan.

For these and a number of other associations, Murōji is commonly thought of as exclusively and strictly connected with the Shingon school of Buddhism; it is also usual to suppose that its history forms an unbroken continuity to a remote past. Fowler tells a quite different story. Her theme is that over the centuries Murōji has been the focus of sectarian rivalries, and far from having a continuous history as a centre for Shingon practice and initiation, it has also been the site for Tendai, Hossō, and Shintō practices. The “ownership” of the temple has changed several times, alternately acting as a sub-temple of the Kōfukuji (Hossō sect) in Nara, and as the “female” equivalent of Mt. Kōya, the main temple of the Shingon.

The changing history of the practices is inscribed in the buildings, the images they house, the material culture of the site, the temple records, and other textual sources. Using her considerable skills as an art historian, Fowler examines the architecture, the iconography and styles of the images, and the documentary evidence to reconstruct the plurality of practices connected with the temple.

As it unfolds, the story she has to tell turns out to be extremely complex, convoluted and potentially bewildering, were it not for Fowler’s writing skills and the organization of her materials. In her telling the narrative has the excitement of a detective

story as she traces leads and sifts evidence. She demonstrates a wide-ranging familiarity with the ancient documents and a rare competence as a translator.

In the first of the five chapters of the book, she gives a general description of the temple and its environment, and the meaning of the name Murō and earlier names given the mountain. Then she gives an account of the legends, festivals and iconography of the Dragon King Zennyō, who is said to dwell in caves on the mountain; she goes on to describe Kūkai's burial of the wish-fulfilling jewel, specifying the significance of the jewel and the Buddha relics it contains, its focal position in the sacred geography of Japan and the part it plays in Shingon rituals for the protection of the state; and finally she indicates the significance of the 35,000 small stupas located beneath the main altar of the Miroku-dō.

As outlined in the first chapter, Shingon lore asserts that the temple was established by Kūkai in the early ninth century on the site where En no Gyōja, the founder of the Shugendō and an ascetic closely associated with Shingon, had practised his austerities a century before. This would seem to establish claims that the temple properly and exclusively belonged to the Shingon sect. The second chapter deconstructs these assumed certainties. It not only shows that adherents of the Tendai were involved in its early history, since the priest Enshū, together with fifty monks, moved there in the ninth century when he was expelled from the Enryakuji in Mt. Hiei following a dispute over the leadership of the Tendai sect, but also, and more importantly, that the *Ben'ichi nenbun dosha sōjō*, the earliest source on Murōji history, reports that the temple was founded in the mid-eighth century, and at that time was regarded as a sub-temple of the Kōfukuji, the Hossō temple in Nara. Fowler shows that since then the affiliation of the temple has changed several times, being alternately associated with the Shingon and Hossō sects. Ever since the ninth century, the proper affiliation of the temple remained a matter of sectarian dispute, but the disagreement came to a head in the seventeenth century, when the Edo government required temples to declare their affiliations. This forced the rival factions to seeking resolution of the dispute in the courts. Although Kōfukuji initially won the rights to the temple, it was registered as Shingon in 1700. Fowler emphasizes that prior to this time the monks at Murōji did not exclusively follow the teachings and practices of esoteric Buddhism, but studied a number of different doctrines and performed a variety of practices, both esoteric and non-esoteric. Fowler claims that the concept that the temple was exclusively associated with the Shingon sect is a modern fabrication, or at least one that does not predate the seventeenth century.

These opening chapters, based largely on textual sources, set the stage for the following three chapters, in which Fowler gives a detailed analysis of the architecture and artworks of Murōji in order to give material evidence for changing identities and sectarian affiliations. In Chapter 3 she examines four of the main buildings—the pagoda, the Miroku Hall, the Main Hall and the Founder's Portrait Hall—and traces the changes they have undergone as one or other Buddhist sect became dominant. In her examination of the pagoda, which dates to about 800 and is therefore one of the oldest Buddhist buildings still standing in Japan, she traces the history of its

structural changes. Her researches were aided by the fact that the building was seriously damaged by a typhoon in 1998. There were mitigating circumstances in this tragic event, since it allowed an examination of the interior of the building, otherwise off-limits, and revealed the presence of five hidden Wisdom Buddhas. Fowler is able to show that the installation of these Buddhas, which are characteristic of the Shingon sect, coincides with the reestablishment of Shingon dominance at Murōji in the Edo period.

The Miroku Hall gives every indication of serving the practices of the Hossō sect, which holds Miroku Bosatsu in special esteem. The Main Hall, by contrast, houses a statue of Nyoirin Kannon, who is more specifically associated with the Shingon, and the inner sanctuary of this building is set up for the performance of the Shingon initiation ceremonies (*kanjō*), with screens for the Matrix and Diamond World mandalas facing each other on either side of the altar. The Main Hall was built in 1308, at a time when there is a shift from Hossō practice to the esoteric practices of the Shingon. The Founder's Portrait Hall, containing an image of Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon sect and supposed founder of the Murōji, was built in the fourteenth century and drastically remodeled in the eighteenth century, both at times when Shingon regained control of the temple.

The remaining two chapters shift attention to the Golden Hall (Kondō) of the temple, and here the story becomes increasingly complex. Over the centuries the Golden Hall, a rare example of a ninth-century building, has undergone radical changes in its name, structure, and form. Fowler traces these in detail, once again connecting them with the vicissitudes in sectarian rivalry. A particularly puzzling feature of the Hall is the arrangement of the sculptures on its altar, five superb images dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, each classified as a National Treasure or Important Cultural Object. The group, consisting of two Buddhas (usually identified as Shaka and Yakushi) and three bodhisattvas (Jūichimen Kannon, Jizō, and Monju), does not correspond to any description in the sutras or iconographic manuals, and no one has been able to give a fully convincing account of why they have been brought together. They were not made at the same time and stylistic differences indicate that they were not originally intended to form a group.

It is not possible here even briefly to rehearse the extraordinary story Fowler tells to reconstruct the significance of the group. By way of intricate analyses of styles and sculptural techniques and excursions into local legends and official records, she comes to the conclusion that originally a triad consisting of Yakushi Nyorai attended by the so-called Bodhisattvas of Light (*hōkō bosatsu*), Jizō and Kannon, stood on the altar, but the original Jizō has been moved to the neighboring village of Sanbonmatsu. Members of the Hossō sect not only replaced the original Jizō with another image of the same bodhisattva sculpted at a later date, but added two other images to the group and changed the identity of the existing Yakushi to that of Shaka. These changes were made in order to establish a correlation of the five images with the *honji* of the five Shintō kami housed at the Kasuga Shrine, which was closely associated with Kōfukuji and the Hossō sect. In this way iconography was manipulated in

the interests of sectarian maneuvering to establish identities and support claims to proprietorship.

Fowler emphasizes on a number of occasions that her intent is to trace the plurality of practice at Murōji. This she does admirably, but it by no means exhausts what the book has to offer. A bare outline such as the above does not do justice to the richness of detail the book provides. It is a mine of information and of important insights. It weaves together configurations of power, cosmology, myth, doctrine, ritual practice, and local and national landscape to form a rich hermeneutical tapestry.

The history she reconstructs is most interesting, but so also is the background to that history. She weaves a brocade from references to sacred landscape, topography as mandala, the inter-connections of the wish-fulfilling jewel, Buddha relics, relic stupas, Japan as a single-prong vajra, the Latter Seven Day Ritual, the Golden Light Sutra, the Nāga King, the Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas, the five kami of Kasuga and their five Buddhist honji, Amaterasu and the opening of the Rock Door, the Light-emitting bodhisattvas, and many other threads. All these interact and inter-reflect in the architecture, images and rituals of Murōji.

Finally, it is to be noted that this is a very handsome book, with excellent illustrations, color plates and a glossary of Japanese and Chinese characters. Scholars might be excused if they feel a little envious when they see how proudly the University of Hawai'i Press has served the author.

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