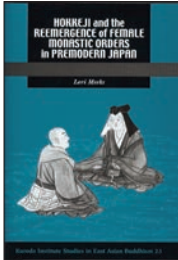


REVIEWS



Lori Meeks, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 424 pp. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3394-7.

THERE are numerous examples in the literature of Heian and Kamakura Japan of women, including Michitsuna's mother in *Kagerō nikki* and Kenreimon'in in *Heike monogatari* to name just two, who retreated to Buddhist temples and monasteries due to failure of fortune at court, despair of life, or (often) both. Prominent examples such as these have left the impression that the retreat of a woman to a Buddhist cloister grew out of efforts to move away from a life somehow made unbearable rather than her being drawn toward a life of religious practice and (presumably) spiritual fulfillment. Using the example of the Kamakura-era revival of Hokkeji, however, Lori Meeks shows that in fact there were important cases in which women took orders as nuns out of a sense of genuine religious fealty. In this extremely valuable book, she also shows how and why the revival of Hokkeji occurred when it did, and most interestingly, shows the way in which the Hokkeji nuns defined themselves, related to their male counterparts in Saidaiji (and they do seem to have seen themselves to be peers of the monks), and carried on the work of the sangha.

Meeks begins by explaining how the circumstances of nunneries changed over time, from the creation of the *kokubunji/kokubunniji* system in the Nara era by Emperor Shōmu and his Queen-Consort Kōmyō that led to the founding of monasteries and nunneries throughout Japan, to the decline of nunneries in particular during the Heian period as a consequence of the rise of Tendai and Shingon esoteric practices that tended to exclude women. With the arrival of the Kamakura era, the field of Buddhist monasticism again opened up as a result of looser court controls on ordinations and revivalist movements such as that of Eison to revive *vinaya* (precept/Ritsu) practice at Saidaiji. Though it is certainly not the case that *vinaya* doctrine treated men and women the same, it did at least have the formal

expectation that a properly functioning sangha would have both men and women practicing the precepts—albeit not in the same monastery, needless to say.

The first chapter of the book begins with a sketch of the early history of Hokkeji in as much detail as possible given the relatively sparse record that remains from that period. There is relatively little to say about Hokkeji in the Heian period due to the decline it experienced as a result of being “left behind in the Nara capital” (28), but it seems rarely to have been completely moribund. In the Kamakura era, however, numerous Buddhist edifices in Nara became popular pilgrimage destinations. Hokkeji held a particular cachet for elite women who were drawn by the miraculous stories of its founder Queen-Consort Kōmyō and its legacy of leadership by female clerics. Meeks offers extensive detail on what stories, images, and relics drew pilgrims, and proceeds to describe how Eison took up its cause in the mid-thirteenth century and the revival of the nunnery into an active center of Buddhist practice by female clerics.

Chapter 2 tells the story of Jizen, the nun who clearly led the restoration of the nunnery, and also treats in detail views of, and spaces for, female religious practice that were developing at the time. Meeks shows how elite women were increasingly seeking more serious modes of religious expression, as seen in the *nyoin gosho* that gave influential female royals standing (and wealth) similar to that of retired emperors. Here, as in other points in this story, we discover that there was relatively less concern at the time with the impediments to Buddhist practice particular to women than conventional accounts might lead us to expect. Chapter 3 likewise explores the perspectives of male clerics of the time, and here Meeks works out in detail how greater space is created for women as a result of the revival of Ritsu by such figures as Eison and the rise of Zen. Though neither Ritsu nor Zen recognized female clerics as equal to male, both had long histories of active participation of women in religious orders. Chapter four considers in more detail Eison’s view of the place of women in the sangha and how the development of a convent was a natural part of his efforts to bring about a *vinaya* revival, and the steps he took to develop a precept-based convent. But though we might expect that Eison and his cohort might have taken a very active role in managing Hokkeji, Meeks shows that in fact once the framework for the convent was constructed, it operated quite independently of Saidaiji and its monks, and developed stand-alone prominence as a repository of Buddhist relics.

Meeks sets herself a difficult task here, on the one hand arguing that Hokkeji is remarkable for its egalitarian inclusion of women from a variety of social strata, and on the other showing fairly clearly that stratification within the convent replicated that of society at large. The top class of nuns were the *bikuni*, who were advanced in both practice and learning, and whose ranks were mostly occupied by elite women of education and means, though extant evidence is somewhat thin on this point. A nun reached *bikuni* status by first passing through the *hōdō shamini* and *shikishi-mana* stages, on what Meeks aptly calls the “bikuni track” (172). Apart from this was the *gyōdō shamini* order that seems to have been occupied primarily by women from

the provincial, rather than the court, elite. This group seems to have been made up from women from a variety of areas around Japan, some of them fairly far-flung. By all indications, *gyōdō shamini* faced a glass ceiling and could not advance to *bikuni* status. Finally, there was another order in Hokkeji called the *saikai-shū* made up of local women who seem to have stood on the boundary between layperson and nun. Their social status and the roles they played are somewhat unclear, but it seems they were responsible for all the work that was not appropriate for nuns in the other orders, including tasks threatening impurity or relating to financial affairs, for example. There are cases of *saikai-shū* women rising to *bikuni* status, meaning that these local women were not absolutely bound by their apparently lower status, but in general it seems clear that their prospects were likewise limited. This fine-grained description of the convent's hierarchy is fascinating not only in its own terms, but it shows that even elite convents like Hokkeji provided women from a variety of walks of life with spaces for religious expression.

Chapter 6, focusing on the ritual life of Hokkeji, is much more fascinating than one might expect of such a subject, for a variety of reasons. First, Meeks shows us that the ritual lives of Hokkeji nuns was every bit as rigorous as that of the Saidaiji monks, and more importantly that the range of rituals they practiced clearly shows that they were able to meet popular needs for such things as memorial services every bit as capably as their male counterparts. Meeks says that they were truly “female priests” (244) and provides ample and very interesting documentation showing this was in fact the case. We also learn of rituals particular to Hokkeji that had special significance for its female clerics, such as the chanted lecture on Ānanda, who persuaded the Buddha to allow women into the sangha, and The Great Brahma Net Ceremony in Honor of Queen-Consort Kōmyō, the matriarch of Hokkeji. Performance of these rituals was doubtless a tacit statement of the legitimacy of nuns engaging in full Buddhist practice.

Finally, in Chapter 7, we see how the Hokkeji nuns confronted the question of how female monastic vocations fit in the *vinaya* tradition, which generally taught that their salvation would come by way of the practices of male clerics, and in the narrowest interpretations, was off limits to them as women. To the credit of the Ritsu monks, at the time there were efforts by some toward creating rationales for how women could achieve salvation, but for the nuns themselves, these were mostly beside the point. As Meeks shows, the ritual and theological expressions of the Hokkeji nuns simply “talked past” those of the Saidaiji monks. They took it for granted that women could achieve salvation, stressing the divine nature of female bodies and the salvific role of mothers both of which they found embodied (we may say) in the figure of Queen-Consort Kōmyō. It was this identification with Kōmyō in particular that allowed the Hokkeji nuns to justify their stance as an independently governed order of nuns. It is beyond the reach of this review to be able to do justice to Meeks' explication of these views, but it is most interesting that at this point in history we find women, and women from a variety of social strata at that, creating

a field of practice over which they had authority in which they could seek salvation without the impediments that we have thought were faced by women at the time.

Meeks' study of thirteenth-century Hokkeji is a valuable addition to the fields of Japanese religion, history, and women's studies. It shows one place at least in which women had independence, agency, and voice while pointing to the possibility of many other similar places. Her exhaustive examination of its revival and inner workings in the context of its era offers those of us interested in medieval Japanese religion and society important new ways to understand the workings of the society of the time, and the place of women in it.

William Londo
Oakland University