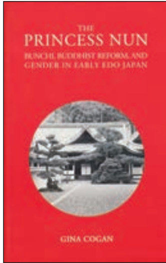
REVIEWS



Gina Cogan, *The Princess Nun: Bunchi, Buddhist Reform, and Gender in Early Edo Japan*

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Simon Partner (2009, 183) has compared microhistories and biographies to Dutch master paintings in that they offer us windows through which to view the past. In the case of Gina Cogan's book *The Princess Nun*, Cogan offers the reader a view of Bunchi's life (1616–1697) that is based on her analysis of premodern materials written by and about Bunchi and framed with the theories of Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, Joan Wallach Scott, and scholars in Buddhist studies such as Bernard Faure, Lori Meeks, and Susanne Mrozik. The effect is nearly seamless: Cogan does not force the materials to fit theories, nor use the theories to fill in gaps in Bunchi's life.

The image Cogan presents to us is Bunchi as a reformer of courtly Buddhism. Unlike male reformers of the seventeenth century, Bunchi did not critique Buddhist practices or the relationship between Buddhism and the shogunate in writing. Rather, she carried out her reform by emphasizing asceticism, renunciation, and the precepts. These strategies were not new; as Cogan points out, countless male reformers had used them. What made them innovative in Bunchi's case was "simply her status as a nun" (114). One goal of her reform was to change courtly Buddhism and Zen by "making ascetic Zen monastic life available to women of the court and the women of the area around [her convent] Enshōji" (99). Bunchi modeled "a different way of being an imperial nun, one more in line with the image of ideal Zen" to these women (114). On the other hand, her work with reformers such as the Zen monk Isshi Bunshu (1608–1646) and the Shingon Ritsu monk Unshō (dates not given) reminded these monks "that Buddhism, and Buddhist asceticism, were for women," and that they should "develop a program of reform in which the definition of a good cleric was not exclusively male" (99). Bunchi's reform was not subversive, however. While others, such as Takuan Sōhō (1573–1646), critiqued the shogunate's involvement in Buddhist matters and paid the price for it, Bunchi sought to "reform Buddhist monasticism so

that it served the state effectively while remaining independent and above reproach by secular institutions such as the shogunate" (103). However, Cogan is careful to note that Bunchi approached these debates from the margins because she was a woman and a member of the imperial family. In spite of this, the analysis of Bunchi's role in the male-dominated debates of her time is one of Cogan's key contributions.

Paintings and biographies, however, can only provide a certain view of their subjects. By focusing on her role as a reformer, Cogan sets aside Bunchi's poetry, her practice of copying sutra passages in her own blood, and her creation of plaques with the names of deities written using Emperor Go-Mizunoo (her father)'s fingernail clippings. However, reading *The Princess Nun* alongside Fister (2000) or sections of the wonderful exhibit catalog by the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies et al. (2009) provides a view of Bunchi's artistic side. Furthermore, this parallel reading places Bunchi's art in the context of her thought: the sacrificial elements of her sutra copying take on further meaning in light of her thoughts on conditioning the body through precepts, for instance.

Biographies and microhistories should also challenge previously held assumptions about the larger course of history. Cogan succeeds here as well. She argues that previous scholars have considered celibate male communities to be the norm because of two opposing assumptions. The first of these assumptions is that convents were not involved in social, economic, and familial elements of society in the same ways monasteries were; in other words, they were not mainstream like male institutions were, so they cannot tell us anything about the mainstream. The second is that convents were similar to monasteries, so there is no need to study them because they will not provide us with new information. In describing Bunchi's life, however, Cogan demonstrates that these assumptions are erroneous and that an examination of convents calls into question the generalizable results of monastery-based studies.

One area of generalization Cogan discusses is bakufu regulations, especially the *jiin hatto*. As she notes, nuns at convents were "rendered invisible" to the bakufu and Buddhist reformers because they were not regulated in the same way that celibate monks and male and female popular religionists were. These nuns were "subject neither to public recognition nor to official regulation by the shogunate," meaning that they did not take part in—nor were they the subjects of discourse on monastic regulations—and that convents were only mentioned once in the bakufu's regulations. Cogan goes to great lengths to explain why this is so, stating that it was not simple oversight; rather, allowing a discussion of female authority "would have necessitated acknowledging the existence of nuns, something neither the shogunate nor most powerful Buddhist institutions were prepared to do" (110–11). Moreover, women could not serve as heads of households so there was no need to separate nuns from the state by denying their potential to procreate in the same way that regulations did for monks.

This is a major difference between monasteries and convents, and bringing it to light is another contribution of Cogan's work. Unfortunately, she does not go far

beyond bakufu regulations in discussing differences between male and female Buddhist institutions. A hint at where to look for further differences comes in chapter 7. When discussing Enshōji's local emplacement Cogan notes that convents were involved in various local systems of control and regulated in the practice of the law, if not its letter. Here she states that "it is a mistake to focus solely on the regulations for monastic institutions or their place in the shogunal administration when seeking to understand the relationship between the state and Buddhism in the Edo period" (176). Unfortunately, Cogan does not use this to explore further differences between convents and monasteries. However, it suggests that by looking beyond bakufu regulations—to bakufu regulatory practices, Buddhist institutional involvement in the local community, and so on—we may come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences between convents and male institutions.

Cogan's work is a mix of chronological and thematic chapters. The first two chapters describe Bunchi's pre-ordination life, court-shogunate relations, and Bunchi's marriage and divorce. Chapters 3 and 4 place Bunchi's renunciation and Buddhist practice in the context of rituals at court, the discussion over the roles of Buddhist institutions in the Tokugawa regime (and vice versa), and reform movements led by monks like Bunchi's teacher Isshi. Chapter 5 focuses on how Bunchi's ordination affected her gender and how gender affected her relationship with Isshi. In chapters 6 through 9, Cogan discusses Enshōji, the convent that Bunchi founded. She discusses Bunchi's decision to locate the convent outside of Kyoto, and how the repeated performance of reclusion and returning to the court brought her prestige. Cogan highlights the inner hierarchy of Enshōji in chapter 7, focusing on the ways that lay, renunciant, courtier, and commoner statuses intersected to create an environment in which the women (courtier and commoner nuns) outranked the men (lay administrators). In the following chapter she examines regulations composed by Bunchi that insured the smooth working of Enshōji and made it a place where nuns could practice precept-based Zen. In chapter 9 Cogan states that the ordination platform that Bunchi built—the first ordination platform for nuns to be built in Japan since the Kamakura period—was the culmination of Bunchi's reform. Finally, in chapter 10 Cogan places Enshōji in the context of other imperial monasteries and convents, stating that Bunchi's asceticism placed her at the head of the imperial abbesses, despite Enshōji's shorter history.

Scholars and graduate students working on Buddhism and gender, Buddhist reform movements, court ritual, and imperial temples, or on the relationships between Buddhism, the shogunate, and the court will find various chapters of *The Princess Nun* enlightening. It is written in a way that is accessible to undergraduates, although the specificity of the book's subject matter and the background knowledge necessary to understand its implications will perhaps limit its usefulness in undergraduate classes.

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