



Jessica Starling, *Guardians of the Buddha's Home: Domestic Religion in Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. xi + 186 pages.
Hardcover, \$62.00; paperback, \$28.00. ISBN 9780824866921
(hardcover); ISBN 9780824888398 (paperback).

In the opening pages of *Guardians of the Buddha's Home*, we follow two children as they chase each other, tumbling and tussling through their family temple on the day of the spring equinox ritual. Along the way we catch glimpses of the life of the temple beyond the ritual halls. This is an excellent preview of what Jessica Starling does for us throughout her book (though Starling is much less rambunctious!): we are shown the lives and stories that might typically remain hidden if we do not seek them out, if we do not look beyond the rituals and ritualists typically focused on. However, even if these lives and stories are often hidden behind *shōji* doors or in back rooms, they are key to the functioning of the temple and its rituals. Indeed, as Starling points out, these domestic activities, “like childrearing and hosting laypeople for tea, food, or sake at their home temple” can also be religious practices (10). Indeed, they are key to understanding how temple families cultivate “relationships and intimate connections with parishioners” that “inculcate Buddhist faith and doctrinal understanding among practitioners” (12).

Starling focuses on Buddhist women in the True Pure Land sects (Jōdo Shinshū). In particular, she looks at *bōmori*, which can be literally translated as “guardians of the temple.” Though typically also translated as “temple wives” or “wife of the head priest” (*jūshoku*), Starling shows that their labors and expertise mean that they should be considered domestic religious professionals. The *bōmori* in Starling’s book work to gain doctrinal knowledge and certifications, raise children (including the successor to the temple), make offerings to Amida, provide guidance and succor to parishioners (both those who visit the temple and on rounds to parishioners’ homes), fight to make changes in their sects, and even become head priest of their temple either permanently or as proxy until someone (often a man) in the family could become the “official” *jūshoku*.

Following the examples of Saba Mahmood and Nirmala Salgado, Starling looks beyond worn Western liberal tropes about agency and freedom to see the lives of her informants and “discover the categories and concepts that work for them on a practical level” (7). In doing so, she shows the ways that they are influenced by feminist ideas, leading to a discussion of the five obstacles and three obediences (*goshō sanjū*) at workshops for temple wives. At the same time, these women cultivated a “Buddhist subjectivity” and embraced “Buddhist frameworks for understanding human contingency,” which led them to “see their encounters with hardship, blessings, mentors, and the like as signposts affirming that the Buddha’s compassion is at work in their lives, and they strive to be responsive to it” (8). In other words, Starling shows how Shin temple wives choose and use the myriad resources (feminist, Buddhist, and so on) they have available to them as they move through and narrate their lives.

Most chapters are laid out in a similar manner, with an ethnographic anecdote, historical background, an explanation of how the Shin Buddhist traditions influence what her interlocutors describe, and a conclusions section which ties that chapter to larger theoretical discussions by scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Veena Das, Robert Orsi, and Elizabeth Pérez. The balance between ethnography, history, theory, and Shin thought feels perfect, and all of the pieces fit together well.

In the introduction, Starling reviews scholarship on Buddhist women, Buddhism and the family, and domestic religion. She also discusses her ethnographic methods: she spent twenty-seven months in Japan interviewing sixty *bōmori* and their families in the Ōtani and Honganji branches of the sect throughout Japan.

Chapter 1 focuses on the “Nagai” family, whose daughters we follow through the temple on the solstice. Through the example of a single family, Starling examines familial relations and obligations and how they are intimately tied to religious roles for the Nagais, arguing that in Shin Buddhism, “the family” is one of “the most significant social institutions for the transmission of belief, practice, and authority” (22). She shows how becoming a priest is an act of filial piety, how

duty to their spouses and families compels some *bōmori* to take on larger roles in the community, and how generational connections can insure the continuation of instruction to *bōmori* and successors to the priesthood. She also shows how older generations can also try to impose limits on younger ones if they are seen as transgressing gender roles.

In chapter 2, Starling turns her attention to the domestic activities of the *bōmori*, showing how their activities are “a form of Buddhist propagation” that has been largely ignored by scholarship (36). Many of the activities of the *bōmori* are domestic because of parishioners’ expectations. Parishioners also expect that the temple will be accessible to them at all times, which requires someone to remain there to greet them. *Bōmori* are thought to be ideal people to stay at home because of the idealized gender roles in Japan over the past century, and because of parishioners’ views that if *bōmori* have outside employment, this suggests that the parishioners’ support of the temple is insufficient. These various ideas mean that *bōmori* are in the temple to greet visitors. At the “intersection of Shin Buddhist spirituality and modern gender roles” is what Starling calls a “propagation of hospitality”: *bōmori* greet parishioners, offer them tea, talk with them and, in so doing, maintain the parishioners’ connections to the temple (61). However, *Bōmori* are caught in a double bind: they are expected to remain at home, and expected to talk with parishioners, but often the expectation that they stay at home means that they cannot gain doctrinal training from the sect which would enhance their conversations with parishioners.

In chapter 3, Starling examines the material and economic dimensions of worship, gifts, events, and daily life, showing how even these seemingly mundane tasks are given distinctly Buddhist meaning by the *bōmori* who perform them. Here the family is thought to have no ownership over the temple or its goods; the temple is the family home and donations sustain the family, but at the same time, family members are stewards of the Buddha’s home and managers of the Buddha’s goods. However, rather than being an alienating experience, Starling highlights how living with Amida and sharing (his) food every day is an intimate experience that is mediated in multiple ways by the *bōmori* as they receive the donation from the parishioners, cook it, offer it to the Buddha, and then share it with their families.

Chapter 4 highlights the education of young *bōmori*, many of whom now come from non-clerical families. Much of their training comes informally from their mothers-in-law and formally through temple wife associations or, if they can manage it, through ten-day *tokudo* training or longer training sessions at sectarian seminaries. Through this combination, *bōmori* gain practical and doctrinal education. Starling demonstrates how the cultivation of a young *bōmori* is tied to these interpersonal relationships inside and outside the temple. Furthermore, by focusing on training across generations of *bōmori*, Starling shows how

their discussions of their time at the temple become imbued with the language of Shin Buddhism: while many initially described meeting their spouses as a random event they later stated that it was the result of karmic predestination, hardships and suffering become narrated as the result of Amida's compassion, and so on.

In chapter 5, Starling discusses female ordination within Shin Buddhism. While Shin Buddhism boasts the highest number of ordained women of any Japanese Buddhist sect (the Honganji branch and Ōtani branch have around ten thousand ordained female priests each according to Starling), many of them are not the resident priest (*jūshoku*) but are the mother, wife, daughter, or widow of the temple's male priest. In this rich chapter, Starling traces the history of female ordination in Shin Buddhism from its origins in the Pacific War when many male priests served in various roles away from their temples. However, at that time, female priests were seen as temporary, a view that continues to this day, as female priests are often thought of as stopgaps if there is a disruption in the male priestly line at a temple.

In chapter 6, Starling surveys the androcentric and misogynist literature propagated by Shin priests from the Edo period until the mid-twentieth century and then highlights the feminist pushback against these messages and institutions among *bōmori* of the Ōtani branch in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Starling is sensitive to the diversity of women's aspirations and the factors that go into negotiating them on an everyday basis. Following the examples of Saba Mahmood, Dorothy Ko, Wendi Adamek, and Lori Meeks, she wants "to avoid confining women's agency within a simplistically dualistic framework" of resistance against or support for oppressive and dominating operations of power (131). The *bōmori* Starling talks with show this complexity as they "change their minds, act in contradiction to their professed beliefs, and simultaneously hold different and even competing senses of freedom as ideals" (154) and in some cases willfully cultivate docility "as when they embrace the view that their experiences of suffering and contingency at the temple are actually manifestations of Amida's compassion" (153). In the process of this discussion, we see some fascinating moments in Shin history as the Ōtani branch wrestled with questions such as, what to do if a female priest marries an unordained man? Does he become the *bōmori*? (In 2008 it was decided that the title of *bōmori* would be held by the spouse of the *jūshoku*, regardless of gender.)

In the conclusion, Starling demonstrates that "domesticity—which often coincides with feminized space and feminized labor but is not necessarily spatially demarcated—is one of the less noticeable yet crucial modes in which religion is performed" (155). She highlights how religious practices are embodied and enacted through daily life and how they are formed in the interpersonal relationships of the *bōmori*. "A focus on intimacy, domesticity, and vulnerability,"

Starling articulates, “is indispensable if we are to understand how doctrinal ideas are lived—if indeed they are lived—by Buddhists” (157).

I strongly recommend *Guardians of the Buddha’s Home* to anyone interested in Buddhism and gender, domestic religion, and Shin Buddhism. Starling brings these elements together and pushes scholarship in these areas forward in a compelling and straightforward manner. The entire book could be used in a seminar, and I have assigned chapters from *Guardians of the Buddha’s Home* in my undergraduate classes (Introduction to Buddhism, Women in Buddhism, and Religious Education classes). After explaining some simple terms, such as what a *bōmori* is, for example, my students were able to grasp the contents and implications of the chapters.

Scholars in the growing field of Buddhist economics might want to pay particular attention to chapter 3 where Starling highlights Shin understandings of the financial relationship between parishioners and the temple. The basic relationship between Buddhist monastics and laypeople is often described at a foundational level as a cycle driven by merit (WALSH 2007; 2010). However, in Shin Buddhism, the creation of merit is said to lack any salvific potential as it is driven by “self-power” (*jiriki*); Shin Buddhists focus on the salvific “other-power” (*tariki*) of Amida and any discussion of donations needs to take that into account. Starling does that by demonstrating how in Shin Buddhism the ideal exchange is driven by faith, compassion, and gratitude and encompasses the parishioners, the temple family, and Amida. In this cycle, the parishioner gains faith in Amida’s salvific powers and wants to repay that “spiritual debt (*hō on*) to Amida” by giving things to the temple out of gratitude (69). The temple residents “become the custodians of these gifts,” which are described as “the Buddha’s blessings,” and in return the temple residents engage in “propagation out of gratitude to Amida” (69). As Starling puts it, “these exchanges... are conducted among humans on behalf of the Buddha Amida” (69). As the examination of Buddhist economics expands, Starling’s discussion of propagation- and gratitude-driven temple economies is a very welcome addition.

Starling’s work is nearly flawless. Her years of fieldwork and relationships with a number of *bōmori* shines through. The ethnographic pieces are so compellingly written that readers can almost taste the green tea Starling drank during her interviews.

I did, however, find myself wondering about temple wives in other sects of Japanese Buddhism. How universal or exceptional are the experiences of the *bōmori*? How large are the places of overlap between them and temple wives in other sects, especially since the position of *bōmori* has been officially recognized by Shin Buddhism for much longer? Also, how much interaction do temple wives have outside of their sects? If they do not meet in person, do they draw inspiration or ideas from women in other sects? There are, of course, several

limitations to including such information. As True Pure Land scholars and practitioners are fond of reminding us, Shin Buddhism is exceptional in a number of ways which might make direct comparisons difficult. Furthermore, inclusion of too much material outside of Shin Buddhism would require a lot of extra ethnographic work and would necessitate another book. Even without this comparative element, however, Starling's book is extremely thorough.

Guardians of the Buddha's Home is a reminder that we should look beyond the priests, statues, and ritual halls, and instead see the ways that temples are brought to life, and that we should go, productively (and figuratively) tumbling and tussling, beyond the boundaries we have traditionally established around the objects of our research.

REFERENCES

WALSH, Michael J.

2007 The economics of salvation: Toward a theory of exchange in Chinese Buddhism. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75: 353–382.
doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfm002

2010 *Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism & Territoriality in Medieval China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Matthew Mitchell
Allegheny College