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When Caitilin J. Griffiths opens *Tracing the Itinerant Path* with the death of the nun Chin’ichibō, it is clear that she is going to expand our understanding of women’s roles in Buddhism and medieval Japanese society. Chin’ichibō was the female leader of a mixed-gender Jishū Pure Land practice hall in fourteenth-century Japan. Her existence alone forces us to reexamine assumptions that nuns did not lead groups that included men and that nuns played only a marginal role in the development of Japanese Buddhist schools. In *Tracing the Itinerant Path*, Griffiths brings to the fore the changing relationship between monks and nuns and fills a lacuna in scholarship on Buddhist nuns and travel.

*Tracing the Itinerant Path* focuses on the contributions of women in *jishū* Pure Land groups. Early jishū groups, Griffiths notes, were varied provisional groups who gathered to chant Amitabha’s name. These jishū groups, she says, were “dynamic and fluid” (p. 3). Members could be lay or monastic, celibate or married, itinerant or living at a practice hall, working or devoted to rituals. Early jishū groups frequently included men and women, young and old, often living at the same practice halls or traveling together.

Griffiths’s ability to uncover the development of these various jishū groups by tracing their sparse tracks in the sectarian documents of the later Ji school is commendable. This task was made more complicated because seventeenth-century Ji school leaders preserved sect-centric documents as well as those that showed their connections to Ippen, but they did not preserve materials on “variant” jishū groups. This has obfuscated the diverse history of the jishū movement and caused modern and contemporary scholars to focus on the Ji school and its version of history. That Griffiths is able to glean any information about these diverse mixed-gender groups from the extant documents and remaining practice halls is in itself a feat. That she presents this information so vividly is a testament to her research and writing.

Methodologically, Griffiths ably answers Barbara Ruch’s call to focus on underused sources in the study of women in Buddhism.[1] Historiographically and theoretically, she draws on Amino Yoshihiko, Bernard Faure, and Lori Meeks.[2] In her analysis of space and gender, she uses Daphne Spain’s *Gendered Spaces* (1992). She uses these theories to good effect, without allowing them to obscure our view of her rich documentary materials.

In addition to the preface, introduction, five chapters, and conclusion, *Tracing the Itinerant Path* includes an appendix with translations of...
seven primary sources. In the preface and introduction, Griffiths introduces readers to the jishū groups and Ji sect along with the historiographical and theoretical framework that she uses. The remaining chapters are roughly historical but also thematic, traversing the three-hundred-year period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Griffiths discusses early female jishū leaders (chapter 1), itinerancy (chapter 2), practice halls (chapter 3), jishū in Kyoto in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (chapter 4), and the transformation from jishū groups to the Ji sect in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (chapter 5). Rather than follow Griffiths's organization chapter by chapter, I will discuss the following themes below: women in the jishū, itinerancy, practice halls, and patron relations.

Griffiths provides nuance to our understanding of itinerant women and women within developing schools of medieval Buddhism, while outlining the changes to women's roles in the jishū from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Her work should lead to a critical reexamination of the roles of women in medieval Japanese Buddhism. Itinerant religious women, Griffiths states, “have historically been portrayed either as socially and politically marginal or as objects of sexuality” (p. 7). A prime example of this is the historical and scholarly treatment of the Kumano bikuni, the largely itinerant female preachers of the medieval and early Tokugawa periods. For example, Ruch states that the Kumano bikuni are variously presented to us as “devout tonsured women ascetics, capable of performing religious miracles and pronouncing oracles, who expounded profound doctrine, wore makeup, hid their shaved heads in scarves, looked sexy, sang a great song, ran bordellos, and practiced prostitution.”[3] She states that rather than view this as a single contradictory image of Kumano bikuni, we should understand it to be a composite made of images of a number of bikuni who had varying institutional affiliations and practices. In another example, Nei Kiyoshi argues for historical changes to the role of the bikuni; they began as licensed fundraising preachers, but the social and legal changes of the mid-seventeenth century made some of the bikuni turn to prostitution to survive.[4]

Following in Ruch's and Nei's footsteps, Griffiths carefully analyzes the activities and ideals surrounding itinerant women, showing us their central roles in the early jishū organizations. Women take up the mantle of leadership in mixed-gender jishū groups, both in the practice halls and on the road. A prime example is Chin’ichibō, who was the female leader of the Okutani mixed-gender jishū practice hall in Shikoku in the fourteenth century. When Takuga, the seventh leader of the Yugyō jishū group (which later became the Ji sect), met her, he expressed no surprise at her leadership. This demonstrates that Buddhist nuns could lead both women and men in these jishū groups, and they did so fairly regularly in the fourteenth century. Griffiths points out that it is not simply that women like Chin’ichibō had important roles within these groups. Male peers and leaders within the groups, as well as the patrons of the groups, viewed these women's roles as essential. In the eyes of these men, Griffiths says, “these female members were not socially marginalized for reason of gender” (p. 7). Griffiths returns to women's changing roles and the evolution of ideas surrounding female salvation throughout the book. Her work in uncovering these changes at various points during the transformation of jishū groups into the Ji school is commendable, and her timeline for these transformations should be kept in mind when discussing changing roles of women in medieval Buddhism.

Griffiths introduces us to the lives of almost a dozen other female jishū practitioners. She is able to glean information about them from such sources as the surviving letters from Shinkyō, who served as head of the Yugyō order after Ippen died. From these few remaining sources, we catch glimpses of these women's lives, their prac-
tices, their needs and wants, and their relationship to the Dharma and the heads of the Yugyō school as it began to coalesce. Through examples such as Chin'ichibō, Griffiths shows us that women were leaders and followers, they expressed dismay at the lack of piety among the locals, they wished to pursue the difficult itinerant life after being assigned to a practice hall, and they were also chastised for their desire to share donations they had received with fellow nuns. Griffiths uses a paucity of sources to provide a plethora of riveting personal stories. Indeed, this is an area where *Tracing the Itinerant Path* shines.

Mendicancy was key to the lives of almost all jishū members, and therefore, it is woven throughout *Tracing the Itinerant Path*. After discussing the context of medieval travel in the second chapter—highlighting the travels of such nuns as Lady Nijō and Abutsu-ni along with the roles of itinerant holy people (*hijiri*) in healing and public works—she turns to the mendicancy of jishū monks and nuns. One of the few drawbacks to *Tracing the Itinerant Path* is that Griffiths does not give an example of what life on the road was like for early groups; this is perhaps due to a lack of surviving documents. She does, however, bring the roles of peripatetic jishū to the fore. They led laypeople in chants, provided funerary services, transmitted letters, and provided some medical services as well. Furthermore, jishū were able to pass through checkpoints along the road freely and without inspection. Because of this, they were often sought out by political and military leaders who did not want information falling into the wrong hands.

Vignettes from documentary evidence fill in some of the gaps in the image of itinerant life. Procuring food was apparently an issue. In one case, a leader sought to remedy this by moving the nun Gen'ichibō from a practice hall to an itinerant group because of her ability to get food, although the documents are unclear whether her skill was in cooking, receiving food donations, or foraging. In another case, it is clear that the difficult and dangerous life on the road potentially had greater spiritual merit associated with it than sedentary practice. The nun Myōichibō had retired from itinerancy to a practice hall because of her age. However, when the leader commented on her lack of dedication to the practice, she pushed to rejoin the mendicant group to demonstrate her devotion.

The style of itinerancy changed as jishū groups became more established and the Yugyō school became more influential. For example, some of the uncertainty surrounding travel was lessened when the head of the Yugyō mendicant groups, the Yugyō *hijiri*, received documents from the Ashikaga shoguns sanctioning his travel and granting him the assistance of local lords. Furthermore, while individual mendicants or a small group traveled with only a few possessions in the fourteenth century, by the sixteenth century the Yugyō *hijiri* traveled with a procession of mendicants, porters, and palanquins.

Although there was merit associated with a life on the road, jishū groups found the itinerant lifestyle difficult to sustain. Soon jishū groups created practice halls, which provided respite from travel and an opportunity to connect with nearby communities and patrons. Many practice halls were established near major ports or trade routes, while others developed within urban centers, such as Kyoto. These functioned as homes and practice areas for stationary monks and nuns, while also serving as nodes in the travels of the itinerant jishū.

These halls attracted people from the surrounding communities, and they hosted religious practices as well as social and cultural events, such as poetry composition and storytelling. In other words, these spaces were often not quiet retreats but vivacious multipurpose areas. Even when there were no visitors present practice halls could be lively. In one instance, Griffiths tells of an affluent woman from a warrior household whose
ordination name was Kaibutsubō. She joined a jishū practice hall after her lord died, and she brought along several young girls (relatives or serving girls) whose rambunctiousness distracted older practitioners. Shinkyō (Ippen’s successor) advised the leader of the hall to have patience and eventually the girls would calm down and join the chanting. While we never learn if that happened, we do know that this was apparently not an isolated instance. In Kyoto, people from a variety of backgrounds joined practice halls as a result of the conflicts of the time, which caused jishū leaders to fret over their lack of religious commitment.

Of course, mixed-gender practice itself came with many challenges, and leaders took care to manage mixed-gender practice and living quarters so that men and women could maintain celibacy. Central to both the regulations and spatial design of the practice halls were two ideas: maintaining the celibacy of the group for their own salvation (sexual activity by members meant expulsion and inability to be reborn in the Pure Land after this life) and demonstrating the groups’ celibacy to the outside world, especially to patrons.

Griffiths states that in contrast to the esoteric and Zen institutions that focused on the elites, the “nembutsu” practice halls attracted a wider segment of society, ranging from these same elites to the unfortunates” and they offered all of them “feasible solutions and methods for achieving a path into the Pure Land” (p. 57). Although jishū sought to promote nembutsu practice among all members of society, they did require patronage to sustain their developing organization. Patronage could come from the impoverished who offered some food in exchange for chanting at a funeral or the wealthy who sponsored the building of a practice hall. In either case, jishū chanting and ritual support was one part of an amalgamation of religious practices; jishū Pure Land groups did not hold a monopoly on patrons’ practices (or their purses).

Wealthy patrons expected something in return for their investment, however. Some expected jishū to come and chant at a moment’s notice. Others, especially lords and military leaders, expected the jishū to be on hand for battles where they would chant the name of Amitabha for the dying or deliver messages to their loved ones. Many jishū also became healers—Griffiths traces the origins of kisoi, treatment of wounds caused by metallic objects, to the jishū. Despite these roles, the jishū were keen to avoid being mistaken for combatants or spies, or of having chosen sides, so they did not handle weapons.

Gender was not an issue where patronage was concerned. Jishū had female sponsors from all levels of society; Griffiths speculates that women in the developing marketplaces “may have had a role in wishing for a nembutsu practice hall, perhaps to help accrue merit or even to join the network the jishū offered” (p. 71). Even within warrior households, some women sponsored and then later joined the jishū ranks as was the case with Kaibutsubō. Griffiths states that in the fourteenth century, “many women had control of their own wealth, and like all other medieval populations, they took a keen interest in their own afterlife” (p. 75). The jishū offered women roles as patrons, and also offered them the possibility to study with female Buddhist teachers, develop spiritually, participate equally, and possibly assume leadership roles. This was something not offered by many other Buddhist institutions at the time.

Tracing the Itinerant Path is extraordinary in a number of ways. Griffiths shows that women held important roles in an emerging medieval school of Buddhism, countering the dominant narrative of women’s decline in society following the Heian period. In this way, it pairs nicely with Meeks’s Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan (2010). Griff-
fi ths provides nuance to our understanding of female itinerancy. She also shows why scholars of Buddhism should question the sect-centric histories and documents, and she demonstrates how to look through these documents for glimpses of alternative histories.

I only have two small critiques of this wonderful book. The first, which I mentioned above, is that I would have liked more information about the everyday life of itinerant practitioners. However, Griffiths probably could not provide this information due to the limitations of her sources. The second critique has to do with organization. For example, chapter 2 is titled “Itinerant Path: Women on the Road.” Within this chapter there is much of interest: a discussion of Abutsu-ni and Lady Nijō, itinerant hijiri (some affiliated with Buddhist schools and others marginally so), medicine, jishū members and battle, and the detailed stories of particular jishū nuns. I was interested in each topic, and gladly followed Griffiths as she led me from one to the next, but I began to wonder how some of them connected with itinerancy, which is the central organizing theme of the chapter. This was especially true for jishū and medicine and their roles on the battlefield (also discussed by Sybil Thornton).[5] This information is essential to know about the jishū and I was excited to see her discussion of it, but it was unclear how it tied into itinerancy. Was it included in this chapter because some mendicant hijiri were considered healers? Perhaps a stronger roadmap at the beginning of the chapter would have made the connections clearer. In any case, these are both small points that do not detract at all from Griffiths's amazing contribution to medieval Japanese Buddhism, the strength of her scholarly detective work, or the incredible stories she tells about individual nuns.

In sum, Tracing the Itinerant Path is a must read for scholars interested in women’s roles in medieval Japan or women in Japanese Buddhism, or anyone questioning sectarian histories. It would also be at home in a graduate-level course on Japanese religions.

Notes


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