

Simone Heidegger

Buddhismus, Geschlechterverhältnis und Diskriminierung: Die gegenwärtige Diskussion im Shin-Buddhismus Japans.

Münster, Berlin: LIT-Verlag (Religiöse Gegenwart Asiens/ Studies in Modern Asian Religions Bd. 4), 2006, 504 pp.

This substantial work by Simone Heidegger (Research Associate at Munich University) investigates the discussion on gender issue and discrimination within the contemporary framework of one of the major Japanese Buddhist denominations, Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism.

The book is structured as follows: an introductory part including the first two chapters, which offer an overview of the Shin Buddhist teachings and of the situation of women within both this denomination and Japanese Buddhism in general, thus providing the background for the whole work; Main Section I (chapters 3-9, in which chapter 9 functions also as conclusions to this first part); Main Section II (chapters 10-14, in which chapter 14 functions as conclusion to this second part); and “Vergleichende Perspektiven” (Comparative Perspectives, chapter 15). A glossary of Japanese terms mostly related to Shin Buddhism with their German translation and a vast bibliography complete the work.

Buddhismus, Geschlechterverhältnis und Diskriminierung (Buddhism, Gender Issue and Discrimination) is the result of both textual studies and Simone Heidegger’s own fieldwork in Kyoto, which included her quite long stay at a Shin Buddhist temple. The written sources taken into account (almost exclusively in Japanese) comprise books, printed materials, journals, reports, lectures etc., in particular from the two main branches of Shin Buddhism, the Ōtani-ha and the Honganji-ha. The research results are based on the analysis of the “active” voices, the public discussion on the issue, as the author herself explains. (p. 25)

The two main sections are dedicated to discussions on both the theoretical and practical levels. Their aim is to show how doctrinal points are perceived and interpreted in the contemporary debate on the gender issue within Shin Buddhism (p. 18), and how the discussion is perceived and manifested at the institutional level (p. 16), as well as at the level of the religious community. In particular, the roles of the priests’ wives (*bōmori* 坊守, literally “the protector of the temple”) and of women priests are analyzed. (p. 19)

In the first main part, doctrinal points in the Shin Buddhist scriptures related to women’s achievement of religious liberation are discussed. For this aim the author analyzes the sutras, in particular the three main sutras of the Pure Land (*Jōdo sambu-kyō*); the writings of the seven patriarchs; Shinran’s writings and those of other relevant figures in Shin Buddhism, such as Zonkaku, Kakunyo, and Rennyō (chapter 3). These serve as the foundation on which the discussion develops in the subsequent chapters. Here, interpretations by contemporary Shin Buddhists are explored and divided into “historical,” “transhistorical” (with their subdivision: literally and symbolic), and “critical” ones. Heidegger refers to the “transhistorical” interpretations as characterized by an apologetic and rather conservative approach.

They tend to follow classical interpretations, such as that of the 35th Vow (in the *Muryōju-kyō*), according to which in order to attain religious liberation women have to reject their bodies and should not be reborn as women. The 35th Vow is seen as a sign of Amida Buddha's compassion through which also women can attain liberation, though disclaiming their status as women. Such interpretations, however, do not face the concrete social problem of discrimination. (pp. 102 ff) Moreover, the question of the liberation of women is strictly linked in those authors, Simone Heidegger points out, with the negative question of the "sinfulness of women" (*Sündigkeit der Frau*), as if to be "woman" meant to be "sinful."

With reference to the "historical" interpretations the author indicates a variety of approaches, from conservative and apologetic to critical ones. As results of some criticisms against the use of controversial texts during the ceremonies, for example, in the 1980s the Honganji-ha deleted from the text used during the funeral ceremony for women (Shinran's *wasan* on the 35th vow) the part related to the transformation of a woman into a man in order to attain religious liberation (pp. 167 ff). Heidegger draws attention to the use of Rennyo's letters in the ceremonies as well as their interpretations in relation to the condition of women (see in particular, the discussion on the passage "women burdened with the five obstacles and the three submissions." (pp. 170-172, 179 ff) Such "historical" interpretations, however, the author notices, include some apologetic positions from the side of Shin Buddhists, which reveal a tendency to advocate the superiority of this denomination over others, such as Sōtō Zen. (p. 187. For a contrasting approach to this issue which reflects self-critical voices among Shin Buddhist scholars cf. pp. 156 ff, 211.)

Chapter 6 is dedicated to critical viewpoints within the Shin Buddhist intellectual environment, and several examples are provided here. One of the central themes is the question on the salvation of women in Buddhism and in particular in Shin Buddhism. Such criticisms develop on two levels: one concerns discrimination in the everyday life of the religious community, for example at the institutional level. This derives from the creation of stereotyped images and biases about the role of women and is transmitted through both classical doctrinal texts and some interpretations of them. The other one involves the level of textual analysis, namely the critique of the disputed points in the scriptures (becoming Buddha, birth in the Pure Land, the five obstacles and the three submissions). Moreover, a section is dedicated to the attitude of critical Shin Buddhist scholars towards the figure of Shinran and Rennyo and how and to which extent such criticism is manifested.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to interpretations of Shinran's dream at Rokkakudō, which present similarities with those interpretative patterns related to the religious salvation of women as explored by Heidegger in the previous chapters.

The second part of the book, shorter than the first one, is entitled "Die Gemeinschaft: Die Diskussion von Geschlechterverhältnis und Diskriminierung in Denominationsrecht, Institutionen und Alltag" (The community: the discussion on gender issue and discrimination in the denomination's laws, institutions and

everyday life). Here Heidegger explores institutional and doctrinal developments within Shin Buddhism in the 20th century, which are relevant to the discussion on discrimination (pp. 283 ff). The reform movements, Dōbō in the Ōtani-ha and Kikan in the Honganji-ha, as well as the role of Shin Buddhism in the issue of the discrimination against *hisabetsu buraku* and in the *buraku* liberation movement are considered here because these developments, as the author highlights, have also had an impact on the discussion on gender issue and discrimination against women (chapters 10-12). Interesting are, among others, Simone Heidegger's considerations on the *hisabetsu buraku* liberation movement and the search of the equality of women, which, as she clearly demonstrates, present several analogies both in their structure and history, such as the issue of bad *karma* ascribed to both 'groups' as a cause of their 'unlucky' condition. (pp. 422 ff, 432) These chapters are characterized by a detailed analysis of documents, of the development of laws and their reforms in both denominations (the Ōtani-ha is taken into account in chapter 11, and the Honganji-ha in chapter 12), as well as on the accounts of personal experiences of discrimination (for example, pp. 350-353, 382-383), and the use of expressions in the Japanese language which reveal discriminative traits (for example, pp. 383-387).

Chapter 13 is dedicated to the discussion on Buddhist equality and its implications in society and has as a starting point an incident which occurred in 1987 within the Ōtani-ha, when the president of its administration, Kurube Nobuo, gave a series of lectures in which some discriminative expressions were used. These referred in particular to the *hisabetsu buraku* issue, but as Heidegger points out, involved also gender discrimination (pp. 398 ff) and religious equality. This incident is analyzed by taking into consideration both traditional Buddhist perspectives and critical voices within Shin Buddhism (see for example, pp. 421 ff).

In the last chapter (15), the author suggests the necessity of further studies in the field of gender studies, in particular regarding the role played by other Buddhist denominations and the comparison between Christianity and Buddhism (specifically Jōdo Shinshū).

A minor point of complaint concerns the structure of the book, namely the lack of an *index*, which in such a substantial and long work would have surely facilitated the reader.

In conclusion, *Buddhismus, Geschlechterverhältnis und Diskriminierung*, characterized by a high level of analysis and extremely rich in information, provides a significant contribution about a topic which has not been sufficiently explored so far. It is a valuable and detailed research source and is therefore recommended for both scholars and students in the field of Japanese religions.

Elisabetta Porcu
Research Fellow, Otani University