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Ambivalence Regarding Women and Female Gender in Premodern Shin Buddhism



Buddhism's historical attitudes towards women and female gender were ambivalent and inconsistent. In Pure Land Buddhism generally, such instability was seemingly marked in the concept of *henjō nanshi*, the idea that women would be born in the Pure Land as males, but the historical interpretations of this idea were ambiguous. In Japan, women's participation in Buddhism was complex even before the advent of the Kamakura reformers; subsequently Japan's Jōdo Shin-shū tradition retained a similar character. This article focuses on texts and their audience receptions. The original texts of Shinran contained apparent contradictions, especially about *henjō nanshi*, because of the way their rhetoric was formed creatively out of earlier Buddhist language. However, gender differentiation does not seem to have been a major problematic in Shinran's essential thought. Furthermore, it appears that in practice women in Shin tradition adopted multiple interpretations (often ones favorable to women) from the very beginning. The initial issues recurred historically and can be traced through the proselytizer Zonkaku, the "middle founder" Rennyo, and Tokugawa-period writings, over a long span of historical evolution in which in the background women's social power in Japan declined. In the historical context it is hard to identify Shin women's subjectivity with clarity.

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*The past is a foreign country;
they do things differently there.*
(L.P. Hartley)

*Buddhism's Tradition of Complexity and Inconsistency
towards Women and Female Gender*

An extensive amount of work on women in Buddhism has been accomplished since Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism* was published in 1979; any study of Japan is backgrounded by that accumulation of knowledge. It has become well-established that the religion displayed a long-running complexity and ambivalence about women, which was also manifested in Japanese Buddhism throughout its history.

The early tradition was multivocal, not necessarily confused, but expressing contending interests and concerns. Sponberg (1992) identified four views: soteriological inclusiveness; institutional androcentrism; ascetic misogyny; and soteriological androgyny. In the case of Mahāyāna, Paul (1979) noted in her pioneering research that the primary texts represented a spectrum of stereotypical views: the temptress, the mother, the nun, role as "good daughter" and "good friend," the bodhisattva with sexual transformation, the bodhisattva without sexual transformation, the feminine as celestial bodhisattva Kuan-yin, and possibly Queen Śrīmālā as a female Buddha. Wilson (1996) argued that regardless of the attitude of the historical Buddha, and no matter what the range of what later texts (especially in the Mahāyāna literature) might say, the long-term later coexistence of women and a *sangha* which was attempting to be an all-male celibate club created a permanent tension in the mainstream institutionalization of the religion.

Heidegger (2006 and 1995) noted concisely that the classical negativity towards women in Buddhism has four dimensions which are not all consistent: the actual fact of women's greater biosocial suffering in past societies; the threat posed to male celibacy; men's general misogyny; and the typical gender subordination of women in the majority of historical political economies and social imaginaries in which Buddhism was embedded. In short, discrimination and awareness of special suffering have routinely been combined.

An important aspect of this complexity is the increasing recognition that Buddhist traditions have to be considered in the plural, as "Buddhisms," i.e. a multiplicity of patterns that may not have quite the level of commonality that was once assumed. (Cuevas and Stone 2007)

In Japan, women and Buddhism had a long history before the so-called Kamakura 鎌倉 (1185-1333) reform period. Women apparently started with a

strong position in the earliest monastic system, which declined over time through the Nara 奈良 (710-794) and Heian 平安 (794-1185) periods, as surveyed by Barbara Ruch (2002).¹ Within the various Buddhisms, the Pure Land sector had its own somewhat distinctive aspects of complexity and inconsistency. Important claims (mentioned in virtually every discussion of women in East Asian Buddhism) were the idea of five obstructions and three obligations (Jp. *goshō sanjū* 五障三従) and the idea of necessary female transformation (*henjō nanshi* 變成男子), i.e. sexual transformation between male and female forms, especially to show that the female could equal the male.

The idea of five obstructions held that women could not become any of five types of superior beings, Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Chakravartin king, or Buddha, the fundamental idea being that women could not rule over men. The three obligations were that women must be subordinate to fathers in the natal home, to husbands in marriage, and to children in old age, with the key idea being that women must always be under the protection as well as control of men. The *goshō sanjū* language can be traced over a long time through various elements of Buddhist literature, but the concepts are clearly based on patriarchal social practices in both India and China which became embedded in the Buddhist texts, all produced by a male monastic class. (See e.g. Nagata 2002)

The *henjō nanshi* concept was somewhat more ambiguous. While it indeed suggests the inferiority of women, the general idea of sexual transformation between male and female forms was multivocal, with many variations, and appeared in an enormous number of texts, its variants including the famous story of the sea dragon's daughter in the Lotus Sutra. The often normative idea expressed in the Pure Land literature—that a woman could (or must) be shape-shifted into male form when born in the Pure Land—was only one of many iterations of the basic concept. (Haeju 1999; there are many studies of transformation in Japanese, such as Nakano 1991)

An apologetic view of *henjō nanshi* is that it offered women relief from suffering and served as a form of *hōben* 方便 (skill-in-means) encouraging women to orient themselves to Buddhism. However, obviously it involved discrimination against the female. Modern commentators have sometimes adopted an entirely unnuanced position that *henjō nanshi* expressed some kind of pure negativity towards women. On this view, the concept was simply misogynist, teaching women to dislike their femaleness irrationally and regardless of experience, and leaving women brainwashed without any powers of subjective criticism or selection. (Nagata 2002; Hosokawa 1999)

1. See e.g. Groner (2002) who discusses the fluctuations in the ordination of women and the actual irregularity and complexity in women's interaction with the Buddhist *vinaya*.

On the other hand, the historical interpretations for women of Pure Land teachings may not be unquestionably clear from the evidence. Harrison (1998) opens his study with discussion of a modern Chinese nun who does not believe either “men” or “women” are born in the Pure Land, using this belief to interrogate, via close readings, what the classic textual tradition really says. Only one of the three major Pure Land sutras—The *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha* (sometimes rendered in English as the *Larger Amida Sūtra*)—even mentions the issue of gender transformation. The single most important passage in it is the Thirty-fifth Vow, which in various iterations is something like this:

If, when I have become a Buddha, all the women in the countless, inconceivable Buddhaworlds, of the ten quarters, on hearing my name, rejoice with faith and delight, conceive the aspiration to bodhi and become disgusted with the female body, if they take female form again after their lives come to an end, I shall not attain perfect awakening.

(Harrison 1998: 558; this is his translation of the Chinese text used in the Shin tradition, numbered 360 in the modern Japanese *Taishō* edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon)

In spite of a common stereotype, Harrison argues that the message of the Sanskrit (and Tibetan) text technically falls into the class of what are called generalized blessings. Via Amitābha, women can become men in the next life if they have *bodhicitta* (the mind for seeking awakening) and if they so choose and desire. But in the form of a generalized blessing the promise is conditional, does not actually relate only to a Pure Land (Skt. Sukhāvati) and does not say women *cannot* be reborn in Sukhāvati as women. The five existing Chinese versions (the Chinese translations are T. 362, 361, 360, 310.5, 363), however, have textual variations which make them inconsistent on this precise point (though the T. 360 text is closer to the Sanskrit and Tibetan).

Harrison emphasizes the protean quality of this text, a quality shared with other Mahāyāna sutras. Therefore any inner intent of the Thirty-fifth Vow in Sanskrit, Tibetan and several of the Chinese translations is not transparent. The evidence suggests a long-term trend to soften any hard-line anti-female stance and move away from the renunciant model. This shows that attempts to rethink this aspect of Pure Land belief have a very long history. Granted, the single-sex conception of Sukhāvati was “extremely persistent and influential,” but Harrison thinks nevertheless there was a tendency behind the Pure Land tradition which informed it from the beginning, which he identifies as “a kind of radical egalitarianism, not as some kind of democratic ideal, but as a more profound non-dualistic insight that divisions and distinctions that impede spiritual progress

and stifle human creativity and happiness ought to be overcome ...”² From this perspective, the classic Pure Land texts represent a long-running dialogue-in-progress over the role that women should play.

Along with a certain fluidity in the teachings themselves, documentation about women’s subjectivity is a formidable problem. For almost the entire course of Asian Buddhist history, we do not really know what these ideas meant to individual women because we lack adequate direct evidence about women’s subjectivity in the past. The uncertainty might be summarized as “description or prescription?” Pure Land doctrine was formed under medieval conditions of inequality. We have no way of interviewing medieval Chinese Buddhist people to find out exactly what they meant by the “inferiority” of women in a medieval context. Did they mean the ideologically inherent inferiority of women, as it tended to be presented in brahmanical, or Confucian, or male Buddhist *sangha* terms? Or did they mean that women were inferior because of uncontrollable biosocial conditions, including their ordinary condition of safety, social oppression, risk of death in childbirth, and opportunities for happiness? It is for this latter reason, argues a common Pure Land apologetic, that in the Pure Land (serving as it did as the epitome of all good things) sentient creatures might want not to have a female gender, just as they might not want to be burdened there with slavery, or physical handicaps such as lameness or blindness.³

The Japan of the Kamakura period, when the Pure Land traditions evolved and expanded, remains a tangled historical problem in which it remains difficult to decide in any overall manner what was happening in Buddhism, and especially what was clearly changing.⁴ It is now understood that particularly in the case of Pure Land teachings any transition from “old” to “new” modulations was much more subtle than was presented in an earlier Kamakura reform (or “reformation”) model.⁵ A leading revisionist voice here is that of Taira Masayuki (1990, 1998, 2001), who has repeatedly returned to the problem since the issue is part of an

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2. Harrison (1998: 565-566). Cf. Hae-ju’s (1999) view of transformation that it was part of a trend subverting male sexism in Buddhism.
 3. Is “female” a conditional status, or an “essence?” Slavery is for example a conditional status; but a “slave” might be understood as a person in permanently fixed position by eternal nature. Thus one might formulate a question of liberation either as “No person will be born in heaven in the condition of a slave” or “No slaves will be born in heaven.” Whereas the first sentence sounds liberative, the second formulation sounds discriminatory.
 4. For an update on this question, see Stone (2006).
 5. The older model is represented for example by Kasahara (1983).

overall reevaluation of the period to which he has contributed.⁶ In these studies Taira has critically addressed Kasahara's erroneous claims: that old Buddhism denied any possibility of women's enlightenment, and continued to do so in the medieval period; that because of lack of contact with women, old Buddhism did not produce real doctrine about women's Pure Land birth; and that women's salvation was finally only established via a sharp change led by the Kamakura reformers. Taira has argued that the facts were different. The oldest Japanese Buddhism showed an equality of monks and nuns. In *kenmitsu* 顯密 Buddhist documents, a great deal is found about women, and both positive and negative views were commonly expressed, including positive views about women lay practitioners, which increasingly spread outside of the monastic communities. At the same time there was also a deepening view of women as sinful or having problematic karma, which Taira relates to an increasingly developed patriarchal system, complemented by a growing ideology of maternalism. (The idea of female Buddhist salvation did not automatically imply at any time social equality). In any case the key implication is that if the inclusion of women was part of old Buddhism from near the beginning and the reform Pure Land teachings were popularizations of ideas that had originated within *kenmitsu* thought itself, then the ideas of Shinran and the Kamakura reformers were not quite revolutionary in the way formerly held. (See also Glassman 2002) At any time, though, what this meant for individual women is hardly unobscured. Jacqueline Stone (2006: 50) reminds us "There are severe limitations to our sources, and how premodern Japanese women themselves received teachings about the alleged karmic burden of female gender remains an open question."

Appreciating Ambivalence in Shin Buddhism

Some scholarship on Shin Buddhism, illustrated by James Dobbins (2004) and Simone Heidegger, has tended to approach the tradition from a roughly feminist position. Bernard Faure (2003), on the other hand, offers perhaps the leading example of an analysis which complicates the view of women across Japanese Buddhism. However, he does not focus on normal Shin tradition. This article aims to supplement the treatments of those three scholars by suggesting a perhaps somewhat stronger appreciation of ambiguity and ambivalence in the Shin version of Buddhism.

6. The currently accepted view, originally inspired by historian Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄, is that *kenmitsu* 顯密 Buddhism—referring to the Buddhist institutions of Nara and Heian, which were bound up with the imperial legal system and the aristocracy—remained for long culturally dominant, and the reformers marginal.

This ambivalence might be approached from several directions. First is the question of women in Japanese social history generally, in which various kinds of ambiguity occur.⁷ Second is how the ambivalence towards women was played out in several dimensions relatively restricted to the Shin tradition itself: the nonmonastic organization of Shin temples, in which the wife (*bōmori* 坊守, literally, guardian of the temple) of the male minister had a narrowly gendered role; the appearance of a few prominent female personalities in the social networks of the religion; the tradition's partially successful avoidance of generic premodern Japanese pollution beliefs about women; and Shin's function as a primary expression of premodern commoner (not samurai) culture. A major additional dimension was the Shin textual tradition, which is the one examined below in this article.

Shinran's Texts

The thought of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), who produced the ideas which were afterwards manifested as the organized Shin denomination, is a fundamental reference, but Shinran's texts actually contain very little about women *per se*.⁸

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7. The background literature is well-developed. On strong economic participation by women, see e.g. Wakita (1995) and Tabata (1994). On local and regional variation in women's lives, see e.g. Tabata (1999), Wakita, Hayashi and Nagahara (1987), and Sōgō jōsei kenkyūkai (1993). On women's economic position in the Edo period, see e.g. Wakita (1987, and 1999), Sōgō jōsei kenkyūkai (1992) and Leupp (1992). On the difficulty of generalizing about women and power relations in the *ie* 家 (the household, in its various local, customary and legal forms), see e.g. (Wakita 1984, 1987, 1993, 1999, and 2006); and Shiba (1969). On the relatively egalitarian quality of life at lower social levels, especially in non-urban agricultural village settings, see Smith (1983), Kumagai (1986), Kuramochi (1992), Masuda (1993), Nagata (2003), Hayami (1983), Yamamoto (2003) and Walthall (1990). On doubts about the influence of Confucian ideology at the lower levels, see Yabuta (2000), Yokota (1999) and Collcutt (1991). On how divorce was common and not necessarily weighted against women, see Fuess (2004) and Durton (2002). On how Japanese society changed after the Meiji Revolution in ways that unprecedentedly limited and controlled women and gender expectations, see Smith and Wiswell (1982), Bacon (1992), and Tabata (1994). Important overall surveys are found in Tonomura and Anderson (2001), Uno (1991), Walthall (1991), Lebra (1991), and Bernstein (1991). On an early Westerner's observations, see Bacon (1902). Furthermore, just like the topic of women and Buddhism, the disciplines of family sociology and women's studies in general have evolved towards seeing relatively strong positions for women. See Morika (1980), Minegishi (1992), Wakita *et al.* (1999), Wakita (2006), Yabuta (2000), and Ooguchi (1995).
8. One piece of evidence commonly used to make a judgement, Shinran's dream, is full of complexities and will be omitted.

This characteristic may go back to Shinran's teacher Hōnen 法然, who like his student did not address the issue of women systematically or quite consistently. References to women are only scattered in Hōnen's writings. The "non-conclusions" of several scholars can be mentioned briefly. Kasahara (1983: 134-162) surveyed relevant passages of Hōnen, including those on women's *ōjō* 往生 (karmic birth in the Pure Land) in Hōnen's letters and the text called the *Ichimai kishomon* 一枚起請文. Of course women appear in the *Daimuryōjū-kyō* 大無量壽經 (*Larger Amida Sūtra*), which contains the Thirty-fifth Vow about female transformation, but a commentary on that sūtra by Hōnen called the *Muryōjūkyō-shaku* 無量壽經釈 is practically the only place where he deals with women at any length, discussing the Thirty-fifth Vow and the five obstacles and three obediences. Other texts include the *Nenbutsu ōjō yōgisho* 念仏往生要義抄 (Selections on Essentials of Nenbutsu Pure Land Birth), a twelve-part *mondō* 問答 (question-and-answer) text, and some hagiographical material (*Hōnen-den* 法然伝). Hōnen's problematic, however, was that all beings can be liberated via the *nenbutsu* 念仏, and the issue of women as a category was peripheral. Bloom (1998) explains that Hōnen generally followed the teaching of Shandao (Jp. Zendō 善導, 613-681), in which through the *nenbutsu* women could be born in the Pure Land, albeit changed to male status. Fukuhara (1991) notes that of course Hōnen's acceptance of *henjō nanshi* must be recognized, even if the core emphasis of his thought should be shifted to *senju nenbutsu* 専修念仏 (exclusive *nenbutsu* practice) instead. However, Fukuhara suggests that a tension between the Thirty-fifth Vow and the idea of universal equality in the *nenbutsu* already appeared visibly in Hōnen.⁹ In a couple of passages, Hōnen turns away from the requirement for *henjō nanshi*, and Fukuhara reasons that in Hōnen, as in Shinran, the inner purport of equality and nondiscrimination via the *nenbutsu* could occasionally override the traditional interpretation of the text. In this vein, Hōnen probably preceded Shinran in suggesting the centrality of the *akunin shōki* 悪人正機 idea (it is the evil/troubled person, not the good/untroubled one, who is the real object of the Buddha's teaching) (see below).

In Hōnen's student Shinran, the conspicuous passages about women are found in two of Shinran's *wasan* (Japanese-language) verses. One of these is *Jōdo wasan* 浄土和讃 (Hymns of the Pure Land) number 60,

So profound is Amida's great compassion
That, manifesting inconceivable Buddha-wisdom,

9. Another tension in the text arose from the question why the Thirty-fifth Vow was needed at all, if the most central Vow, the Eighteenth Vow, was understood to include all persons already. The rationalization used by Hōnen is that although the Eighteenth Vow is indeed inclusive, women have so many obstacles that the Thirty-fifth Vow is needed to make extra clear their inclusion.

The Buddha established the Vow of transformation into men (*henjō nanshi*)
 Thereby vowing to enable women to attain Buddhahood.
 (SSZ 2: 493; translation from CWS I: 341)

This verse is one of a set of twenty-two that summarize the key points of the *Larger Amida Sūtra*; this particular verse summarizes the point of the Thirty-fifth Vow contained in it which was quoted earlier.

The other verse is *Kōsō wasan* 高僧和讃 (Hymns of the Pure Land Masters) number 64,

If women did not entrust themselves to Amida's Name and Vow,
 They would never become free of the five obstructions,
 Even though they passed through myriads of kalpas;
 How, then, would their existence as women be transformed?
 (SSZ 2: 508; translation from CWS I: 377)

This verse is one of a set of twenty-six that summarize the key points in the writings of Shandao, the Chinese Pure Land teacher whose language was closest to the interests of Hōnen and Shinran; this particular verse summarizes one of Shandao's many allusions, here to the concept of women's obstacles and submissions which floats generically in the background of the writing.

It might be emphasized that these *wasan* passages do not occupy much room in the Shinran corpus. To provide a rough idea, they constitute about eight lines, or half a page with lots of spacing, in the nearly seven hundred pages of other material in the English translation *The Collected Works of Shinran*. Furthermore, in each context above, Shinran is citing and reviewing selections from the past history of Pure Land Buddhism, but not obviously speaking for himself; and what seems to be of interest to Shinran is not the exact details—many details in the past history of the doctrines had nuances originally differing from Shinran's own special interpretation of them—but rather the broad idea of a movement or progression towards Shinran's position.¹⁰

When Shinran unmistakably speaks for himself in his writings he seems to take a position of nondiscrimination. The most commonly referred-to text is located in the *Shin* 信 or “entrusting” chapter of Shinran's interpretive anthology *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証:

10. A peripheral issue is that in the Pure Land text *Kanmuryōjū-kyō* 觀無量壽經 (Contemplation Sūtra) which is also used in Shin Buddhism, the narrative of Queen Vaidehī 韋提希 plays an important role in the traditional preaching imaginary. While female-oriented readings of the Vaidehī story are possible, Vaidehī's femaleness as such has not been prominently thematized in Shin tradition; instead normally she has been taken to offer a gender-neutral image of human ordinariness and weakness.

In reflecting on the ocean of great shinjin, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts, neither sudden attainment nor gradual attainment, neither meditative practice nor nonmeditative practice, neither right contemplation nor wrong contemplation, neither thought nor no-thought, neither daily life nor the moment of death, neither many-calling nor once-calling. It is simply shinjin, that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable. (SSZ 2: 68; translation from CWS I: 107)

The point to emphasize here is that it is challenging to find passages in Shinran's writings which express in his own unambiguous voice anything about gender differentiation as a central issue or a problem. The section quoted in full above is an illustration. Gender comes up in passing, along with a number of other possible forms of discrimination, but is rhetorically embedded within and subordinated to the larger problematic of Amida's universal salvation, and the whole is processed through an intricate discursive engagement with a mass of inherited Buddhist textual material in the way typical of Shinran's doctrinal corpus.

The kind of relatively unproblematized interpretation foregrounded (for example) in Dobbins (2004: 103-105), to the effect that Shinran simply accepted the ideas discriminatory towards women, can probably be interrogated. The problem here might be one of making distinctions among the differing "voices" which speak out of Shinran's multilayered corpus. It was perhaps not so much that Shinran's attitude was actually "two-edged" (as suggested by Dobbins), as that Shinran inherited, and perhaps incompletely processed (at least to later eyes), a textual tradition at odds with what Shinran finally wanted to say and which left Shinran's descendants with formal contradictions.

To further grasp this suggestion, one has to take account of Shinran's literariness, the multiple levels of reception of the Pure Land discourse which are implicated from the beginning, and a certain tendency of representers of Shin teaching to be evasive about this fluidity.¹¹

The personalized quality of text interpretation in Shinran was not arbitrary but inherent in the Tendai tradition in which Shinran was schooled. A detailed discussion has been provided by Jacqueline Stone, who elaborates on the condition of the hermeneutical tradition on Mt. Hiei in Shinran's time. Prominent was a shift to the so-called *kanjin* 観心-style interpretive mode, characteristic of medieval *kuden* 口伝 (oral transmission), in which the object was to extract hidden and often

11. Dobbins (2004) indicates in footnotes, however, that he is completely aware of all these interpretive issues but simply decided to weight his own principal narrative differently.

unconventional meanings. In fact this appears to have been grounded in an earlier Tendai tradition in which practices of textual study, language, contemplation, and personal transformation were linked together. Rather than exegesis, this process can be termed *eisegesis* or “reading in,” so that the text is made to conform to the enlightened insight rather than vice versa. Application of these various twists led to the production of texts of high, even dizzying complexity and ingenuity. As Stone (1999: 153-167) notes, modern scholars have sometimes reacted by dismissing the performances as “arbitrary,” but this does not explain what was going on. Nasu (2006) provides a congruent supporting view of Shinran and *kanjin* from a specifically Shin standpoint.

The modern Ōtani University scholar Yasutomi Shin'ya (2004) also discusses the problem of interpretation in Shin. He admits that Shin has a complicated tradition of text reading; and its way of handling the readings, derived from Shinran, has always seemed strange to scholars outside the denomination. Yet Yasutomi notes that from a Buddhist point of view, flexibility of language should not be a problem. Buddhism aims to avoid attachment to language; words are only a finger pointing at the moon. Language is a symbol of truths that go beyond words. Zen of course is famous for refusal of words, but the Pure Land too is an “image” for the experience of *anjin* 安心 (peace of mind, satori). The sutras are metaphorical in ways that contrast with language-based fundamentalism.

Presupposing then that Shinran's approach to texts involved selection, recontextualization, and reinterpretation, it should not be assumed that Shinran's understandings of any inherited textual material would necessarily be literal. Rather, the purpose of his assembly of doctrinal elements in a specialized rhetorical network was to support his conclusive creative idea of Amida's universal liberative power.

The second problem is reception of texts by various audiences of actual people, without which no treatment of Pure Land in Japan fully makes sense. As many as four *different* patterns of thinking about the Pure Land were in play.

A reception which might be called “Common Japanese” was based on the typical Chinese interpretation and conveyed in Japan through old monastic Buddhism and Hōnen. In this view, the Pure Land is a “form” realm, which serves as a karmic transition zone; typically persons cannot be born there in female form, but must undergo *benjō nanshi*. In Japan, this view also tended to accept *raigō* 来迎 (the descent of Amida to the deathbed to welcome the devotee to the Pure Land), miracles, *genze riyaku* 現世利益 (“this-worldly benefits,” i.e. concrete magical effects achieved through Buddhist practices or deities), and (often) female pollution; in short it was a highly familiar variant of Japanese “folk” Buddhism.

The “Shin formless” reception was based on a proper or “technical” reading of Shinran and followed his own idiosyncratic understanding. The Pure Land is the formless realm of ultimate nirvana, i.e. dissolution of karma. *Shinjin* 信心 is a (more

or less) partial apprehension or satori about this reality which fixes in a person the future dissolution of karma at biological death. Since the Pure Land is formless, then the point for women is not birth in Pure Land as women or not, but dissolution into formless state directly from the present biological female form-state with *no intervening male phase* required. This interpretation ignores *raigō* and in theory is austere avoidant towards most *kami* 神 (Shintō deities), miracles, *genze riyaku*, and pollution.

A third variation can be called the “Shin vernacular,” and is based on a partial appropriation of Shinran’s ideas. In fact the concept is included, though given secondary status, in Shinran’s own system as the transformed or provisional Pure Land (*kedo* 化土) in the last part of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. In this variation, the Pure Land is understood as formful, so that those persons are born there with some karmic continuity (and join family members for example). *Shin* (信, entrusting, “faith”) is the confidence that this karmic transfer or rebirth will happen. The most interesting point is that this position, like the formless one, also denies *raigō*, and is relatively austere avoidant towards miracles, *genze riyaku*, and pollution; that is to say, in its own way it is an “internalized” religiosity even though it does not quite follow through with elevated Mahāyāna psychology and does not entirely cohere with Shinran’s primary religious focus. In other words, even when Shin language was not understood in a “philosophically sophisticated” way, but rather in some more vernacular way, nevertheless the qualities of strong personal interiority (distance from *kami*, egalitarianism, and so on) could be retained as part of the package in a fashion which made Shin to an extent distinct among Japanese Buddhisms. Though not exactly the ideal, a Shin vernacular understanding has been the *hōben* of the tradition for the majority of its members historically.

Finally, in the “Pure Land in this world” alternative, which appears in some kinds of Zen or esoteric Buddhism, the Pure Land can be a referent for a state of enlightenment achievable in this body.

The multiple levels of reception have a close relationship with women in Shin tradition in part because of the hypothesis that Shinran’s wife Eshinni 恵信尼, following a Shin vernacular understanding but *in addition* ignoring the idea that *henjō nanshi* would be necessary, expected to go to the Pure Land in her current body.¹²

12. Argued extensively by Dobbins (2004); see also Hosokawa (1999) and Kikumura (1988: 134); a related idea may have been that maleness was optional though not necessary. Nishiguchi (2006) also defended the idea of a gap between vernacular and elite versions of the teaching; in the former, it is natural for a woman to understand she would be born as such in the Pure Land. This is, as Dobbins argued, a view that is in a sense favorable to women, but also makes clear that Shinran’s own spouse did

This introduces the matter of hesitation in confronting contradictions in Shinran. Shinran's texts are neither perfectly systematic nor without inconsistencies. In the case of women, specific elements are in tension as sketched above. On one side are the two *wasan*, the Thirty-fifth Vow, the idea of *henjō nanshi*, and the old tropes of the five obstacles and three submissions. On the other side are the Eighteenth Vow of the *Larger Amida Sūtra*,¹³ the passage about nondiscrimination in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, and the normative doctrinal conceptions of *shinjin* and the stage of the "truly settled" (*shōjōju* 正定聚, equivalent to the forty-first or higher bodhisattva level in the general Mahāyāna mythos).

Ōtani University scholar Inoue Takami 井上尚実 comments:

Scholastic readings of the sutras and commentaries require a critical, 'objective' eye to contradictions and some 'logical' explanation in order to make them somehow consistent ... the reason why Shinran's original texts don't make an explicit statement about the dissolution of "male and female" forms in the Pure Land is that Shinran (like the seven masters of the Pure Land tradition) wrote as a scholar-and-believer to scholars and believers. It's not wise to make a single, definite statement when different levels of interpretations are possible ... '*Henjō nanshi*' is a good

not fully understand or share his understanding as a Buddhist philosopher. Yamazaki (2004) focuses on the same point of divergent understandings within Shinran's own family. As recorded in the famous correspondence between Shinran's wife Eshinni and Shinran's daughter Kakushinni 覚信尼 (who was present at Shinran's deathbed), the latter may have been confused because she did not see anything special or miraculous at the time of Shinran's death, suggesting she had different expectations, perhaps more like the common Japanese one, perhaps a *raigō* scene. Her mother Eshinni corrected her on that, but for Eshinni too, it is likely that her understanding of *ōjō* 往生 (karmic birth in the Pure Land) differed from Shinran's. Specifically, of course, Shinran's idea of a formless realm was different from Eshinni's idea of birth in form as woman (if that is what Eshinni really thought). Such a reading accepts that a difference of interpretation is not surprising, especially for two people who lived apart a long time, and when systematic Shin doctrine had not developed yet. In short, although Shinran and Eshinni have been presented as the ideal double-bodhisattva couple, there is really a limit to this kind of "family" doctrine. Yamazaki does not think this interpretation is either right, based on the evidence, or necessary either for religious purposes. It is also possible to be skeptical that we have enough evidence to really conclude what Eshinni thought about going to the Pure Land, especially any identity as a woman there. (Harrison 1998: 567)

13. This is the famous linchpin of Shin doctrine, which holds (according to the special Shin reading) that the one requirement for birth in the Pure Land (however that be interpreted) is an act of *nenbutsu* understood as coterminous with an experience of deep entrusting (*shin* 信), a doctrinal conception which despite other complications has nothing to do with gender differentiation.

example of ‘textual resistance’ which requires an eye to see beyond the letter of the text to the spirit which formed it. (Personal communication)

Of course many scholars have encountered contradictory aspects of Shinran. Bloom (1998: 14-16) summarizes passages of Shinran, recognizing inconsistency but with the idea that the inconsistency was simply overcome by the cardinal message of *tariki* 他力 (“other-power” or “vow-power,” the activity of Amida in Shin doctrine). Dobbins (2004: 103) was carefully aware of the *kanjin* tradition but still could not see quite why the great teacher apparently lapsed into doctrinal stereotypes. The evasion of confronting Shinran’s inconsistency arises in part because of a history of static, highly theoretical and textualist, even legalist readings, which oversystematize Shinran’s thought and express too little interest in examining shifting social historical contexts of interpretation. Such readings have been part of the native Japanese tradition since at least the Edo period. Until recently too few Japanese *kyōgaku* 教学 (doctrinal) scholars have made use of international intellectual traditions about textual interpretation.

As an example, for Hishiki (1995) the cardinal truth about Shinran and women is still the Thirty-fifth Vow of the Larger Sutra. He notes there is a question about what the content means; the vow may be conditional for women who *may want* to change genders (cf. Harrison 1998); but eventually, conventional interpretation emphasized that change was *required*. The interesting point is that Hishiki feels compelled to stand close to a certain literalism in the classic texts.

On the other hand, Kurihara (1991) is a scholar who takes contradiction seriously, noting that Shinran has been fiercely criticized on the issue of women, but that there are actually multiple, only partly overlapping understandings of Shinran’s views. 1) According to scholars like Kasahara and Oguri Junko, Shinran accepted *henjō nanshi*. 2) According to scholar Minamoto Junko, the existential situation of women is different from men’s. 3) According to scholar Matsuo Kenji, Hōnen and Shinran simply had their doctrinal limits in this area. 4) According to Taira, Hōnen and Shinran did not say much, but they left an unfortunate opening for a tendency critical of women. Kurihara himself takes Taira’s position. In the same vein, Kuroda (1994) offers an unusual apologetic rendition which admits that while Shinran can be seen idealistically as essentially transcending all boundaries, there is a real problem with the *wasan*, which are both related to the Thirty-fifth Vow. Overtly recognizing contradiction, then, he suggests that the Thirty-fifth Vow can actually be divided into two parts; only the first part is “really true” to the essential Shinran, because *henjō nanshi* is at odds with Shinran’s idea of women’s *ōjō* into a formless realm. In fact, Kurihara finds evidence that even some Edo 江戸-period scholars were aware of the textual contradiction posed by the Thirty-fifth Vow and tried to construct mediating interpretations centuries ago.

To sum up, with *kanjin* literariness and implicit multiple receptions of the Pure Land in mind, it becomes perhaps easier to make sense of the (seemingly-unsatisfactory) way the topic of Shinran and women is usually handled by Japanese scholars who are relatively close to the tradition. The key point is that historically in Shin Buddhism, the “gender discourse” circles not so much around gender per se as around the concept of *akunin shōki* (flawed/evil humans are the beings who are indeed the aim of Amida’s activity), which is a fundamental aspect of the Shin psychology and which basically applies equally to women and men. When Kasahara (1983: 163-176) treated Shinran in his large study, the author’s first topic after Shinran’s biography was the *akunin shōki* principle. Only then did he move on to the *wasan*. Taira’s work includes much discussion of this mode of rhetoric, which after Shinran’s time was sometimes modified to a rhetoric of *nyonin shōki* 女人正機 (women are the beings who are indeed the aim of Amida’s activity). (Taira 2001: 100-167) The trope of dramatic extremes goes back to Shinran where it was rhetorically fundamental and it thus became characteristic of the *general* language of the tradition, for both women and men, although stronger variants could be directed to women. One of Shinran’s most famous *wasan* verses used the metaphor of ice and water,

Obstructions of karmic evil turn into virtues;
It is like the relation of ice and water,
The more the ice, the more the water;
The more the obstructions, the more the virtues.
(*Kōsō wasan* number 40; SSZ 2: 506; translation from CWS I: 371)¹⁴

*Contributions of Zonkaku, Rennyo and the Edo Period
to the Textual Rhetoric on Women*

After Shinran, the Shin doctrinal leaders Zonkaku and Rennyo (but only these two) provided other rhetoric that applied to women, and in a distinctly more negative tone than in Shinran. In both cases, the background reasons why the language shifted are not completely clear because of lack of complete information, and explanations are debatable.

Zonkaku 存覚 (1290-1373) was Shinran’s great-great-grandson, a somewhat controversial character who was very interested in proselytizing and who was

14. Or as restated by the modern scholar Shigaraki Takamaro in his own metaphors, “The deeper our karmic evil, the more the life of the Buddha will be. ... the deeper we dig down into the ground, the more clean water will gush forth from the earth. Or, the harder that one strikes a ball towards the ground, the higher the ball will fly up into the sky in the opposite direction.” (Shigaraki 2005: 141-142)

estranged from his father Kakunyo for part of his life and did not become part of the hereditary lineage of the Hongan-ji. Zonkaku wrote a number of short texts on various topics. His text on women, his only address to this question, is a short piece called *Nyonin ōjō kikigaki* 女人往生聞書 (Oral Record Concerning Women's Pure Land Birth)¹⁵

The text is composed in response to a question about the apparent disparity between the Eighteenth Vow and the Thirty-fifth Vow. Following Hōnen, the basic rationalization is that although the Eighteenth Vow is indeed inclusive, women have so many obstacles that the Thirty-fifth Vow is needed to make extra clear their inclusion. Zonkaku quotes from various pieces of Buddhist literature, i.e. sutras and treatises, which criticize women. If women understand such criticism, they will lose hope, because those texts say that even without overtly evil acts, women produce bad karma by their ordinary thoughts and actions, such as emotions of envy and personal vanity in dress. The five obstacles and three submissions are the punishing outcome of karmic rebirth as a woman. Ordinarily, women have no chance to escape this kind of transmigration, except of course through Pure Land teaching. Zonkaku then presents Hōnen's rendering of Shandao's teaching on women, and explains how each of the three main sutras used in the Shin tradition has something special to say to women: the *Larger Amida Sūtra* establishes the Thirty-fifth Vow; the *Contemplation Sūtra* teaches the example of Queen Vaidehī; and the *Smaller Amida Sūtra* (*Amida-kyō* 阿彌陀經) speaks to men and women together as *nenbutsu* practitioners. The idea is introduced that Amida's compassion even gives priority to women among sentient beings. Women attain birth in the Pure Land and become non-retrogressive bodhisattvas.¹⁶

Evaluating this text, Bloom observes that Zonkaku was aiming to promote Pure Land teaching, but that he did so by means of traditional, monastic tropes which were disparaging of women. Kasahara noted that Zonkaku's language shifted the *akunin shōki* emphasis somewhat to *nyonin shōki*, and considered that this language had a great deal of later influence on Shin teaching.

However, the text is perhaps also a bit of a puzzle. It is not an exegesis of Shinran, but rather it is an excursion into a somewhat indirectly related area of Pure Land text reading. Nor does it sound like Rennyo, who came afterwards and who

15. On the text, see Bloom (1998: 16-18); Kasahara (1983: 236-244); Ducor (1993: 340); and Takadani (1976). The original text is available in SSZ 3: 109-118.

16. The composition of the text was apparently requested by the Bukkō-ji 仏光寺, one of the other early lines of Shin teaching. Chiba (1984) suggested that the request to Zonkaku from Bukkō-ji head Ryōgen 了源 (or indeed maybe even his wife Ryōmyōni 了明尼) for the *Nyonin ōjō kikigaki* actually marked the special value and importance of women in the Bukkō-ji community, *in that time and context*. (See also Tashiro 1996: 65-82)

had a much more realistic-sounding, (albeit patriarchal) view of women's obstacles. The work also seems hard to explain fully in terms of the patriarchal social change which is often mentioned as a context for Rennyō's language; although Zonkaku was born several generations after Shinran (born one hundred twenty-eight years after Shinran's death), it was in a social world which had probably only changed somewhat since Shinran's time, and was not as male-oriented as it would become a couple of centuries later. A plausible rationalization is that the text has to do with Zonkaku's main lifetime activity of popularization. (Ducor 1993) Zonkaku was concerned with extensive proselytizing, in other words a different primary set of issues than Shinran, which brought Zonkaku into contact with the contemporary Buddhist culture in a different way, requiring a different kind of discourse and different kind of give-and-take. Perhaps his world was already more complex and problematic on women than was Shinran's, though it is not clear if Zonkaku talked to female audiences. Perhaps his work also was largely a text about texts, that is, this was an exercise in textual argument aimed at preachers from other lines of Buddhism, in a layered discursive context we do not know enough about. Perhaps Zonkaku, who had inherited a sense of textual contradiction between the Eighteenth Vow and Thirty-fifth Vows, was out on the hustings helping debate an inconsistency in doctrine and textuality to some extent with outsiders, and it was not his purpose there to present the radicalness of Shinran's views.

The second, and most important, body of language concerning women comes from Rennyō 蓮如 (1415-1499). This discourse is important not only because Rennyō had a much stronger mode of address to women than Shinran, but also because independently it would become Rennyō's modulation of Shinran's language which served as the most common form of communication of Shin Buddhism in the later centuries of the tradition. However, although far more is known about Rennyō than either Shinran or Zonkaku, still this does not solve all the questions in establishing the reasons for his language.

The topic of Rennyō and women has been widely treated in Japanese and surveyed by Bloom (1998). Rennyō is generally regarded as having great sympathy for women because of his own family experience—loss of his mother, death of four wives, deaths at a young age of six of his fourteen daughters—and because of the large number of women who joined the membership around him. All commentators refer to this aspect of his biography. Among the two hundred and twelve authenticated letters of Rennyō, women are referred to in fifty-eight. In the main *Gobunshō* 御文章 collection (also referred to as *Ofumi* 御文), fifteen of the eighty letters mention women. In this material, there are nine passages where Rennyō refers to the five obstacles and three submissions.¹⁷ The term *henjō nanshi* is

17. However counts of these references to women can vary; for details, see also Okumoto (1996) and Tanokura (1991).

mentioned only once in among Rennyo's letters, and does not seem to have figured importantly. (This letter was not included in the main collection). Rennyo knew Shinran's core teaching, and knew that ideally to have attained *shinjin* and become truly settled meant a serious level of enlightenment and dissolution into the formless at death. Rennyo also knew however that in vernacular interpretations of Shin (such as that maintained in the "divergent doctrine" Sanmonto 三門徒 line), women were understood as being able to enter the Pure Land in the form of women as in life. Probably, Rennyo knew that most of his own female members thought they would go to the Pure Land as women.

A major difference with Shinran is that where Shinran's language was generalized to human beings, Rennyo was often much more specific about women *per se*. From the standpoint of ultimate liberation there is no difference between the genders, and from the standpoint of evil males are already strongly labeled as *bonbu* 凡夫 (ordinary weak human beings, ignorant persons of error and inability). However, in comparison, Rennyo emphasizes in several places that women are even deeper than men in their karmic trouble and defilement. For example, women easily become oriented to family and household business matters rather than spiritual matters.

Rennyo does not draw upon the heavy repertoire of negativity in earlier, monastic Buddhist texts, but the question arises why women should be negatively distinguished in this way at all in the rhetoric, given that the institutional system was nonmonastic and the members were often married couples. Bloom suggests the answer is sociological: in a basically patriarchal society, birth as a woman is a disadvantage, indicating bad karma. Bloom suggests that although Rennyo does not question this framework, he uses the language of women's bad karma as a kind of special device to emphasize his understanding of their position and to get extra leverage for the notion that Amida works particularly for them. In this connection, Rennyo was distinctly sectarian. Rennyo claimed that all the other gods and Buddhas had abandoned women (or all *bonbu*) in the age of *mappō* 末法 (the latter, decadent Dharma age), so in playing up the uniqueness of Amida's saving relationship to women, Rennyo was clearly making unusually narrow institutional claims which to some extent misrepresented the possibilities for women in other lines of Buddhism.

Bloom specifies that any positivity towards women was situated in the spiritual realm, and was not addressed to raising the status of women in the actual society. The critical religious rhetoric tended to strengthen stereotypes of women as inferior creatures, which fed back into the patriarchal social world, and Rennyo did not question the idea of three submissions. Finally, Rennyo did not clarify the contradictions in the textual tradition, particularly the discrepancy between the Eighteenth Vow and Thirty-fifth Vow. Bloom's summary hints why interpretations of Rennyo vary widely, dividing generally into those who think some kind of

simple misogyny (leading to female self-abnegation and destruction of women's subjectivity) was expressed in his teaching, and those who suggest that the historical situation was more complex.

A supporting element on one side of such a debate is the Kengyokuni 見玉尼 letter, a rather personal account of the early death of one of Rennyō's daughters which was not included in the primary *Gobunshō* collection. The letter focuses on the hardships of the daughter Kengyoku (who was sent away as a child for service work), the importance of Pure Land religiosity, and the idea that Kengyoku was a teacher to her father Rennyō. Most scholars have concluded that this death—along with deaths of Rennyō's second wife, and three other daughters, in a rather short period of time—had a great existential impact on Rennyō. Nothing in it suggests discrimination against women.¹⁸ Yasutomi (2006) argued that Rennyō's attitude about women was similar to attitudes about other kinds of oppressed people. Similarly in Tashiro's (1996) discussion of Rennyō's view of women the author argues that Rennyō put himself in same place as a woman, but that this kind of deeply symbolic, sympathetic identity-switching was afterwards distorted in the Edo period by the penetration of Confucian influence and attitudes of *danson jōhi* 男尊女卑 (respecting males, denigrating females). A number of other interpreters likewise suggest that "women" represented all sentient beings, i.e. that in a sense the terms "women," "evil persons," and "all of us human beings" are all existentially equivalent.¹⁹

Yet Rennyō was also genuinely negative towards women too, and Matsumura (2006) provided an excellent summary of the inconsistencies. The language of Rennyō's letters expresses contrasting attitudes: on one hand men and women are equal; on the other hand women's bad karma (five obstacles and three submissions) and the terrible karma of the truly evil person (ten transgressions and five grave offenses) are synonymous so that women without special aid cannot be saved in the

18. Matsumoto (1999); see Nakamura (1997) for a discussion of the death of another Rennyō daughter as well as of other women in Rennyō's family.

19. Yasutomi (2006) recounts a famous story which suggests the real situational complexity of Rennyō's age. The tale of the flesh-adhering mask concerns a woman who had lost both husband and children to illness. She began to go hear the preaching of Rennyō, who had come to reside at Yoshizaki 吉崎 at the time. Her mother-in-law tried to block the woman's visits to hear Rennyō, and even one night put on a mask, waited by the side of the road, and tried to frighten the daughter-in-law. But due to her religious faith the daughter-in-law was not deterred. Indeed afterwards, the mask became stuck to the mother-in-law's face. It loosened and fell off only after she learned from her daughter-in-law to say the *nenbutsu*. The story is concerned with women's issues in specific ways, the suffering of women who have lost children and family members; mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law conflict; the low social status of women; and their special needs.

condition of their evil karma (which is worse than men's karma). Matsumura adopts the perspective that the apparent tension, especially of course the heavily negative language about women, refracts the attitudes of general society at that time: especially, because of social conditions and indoctrination, most women themselves regarded themselves more negatively than men; and thus represented the extreme case of suffering which particularly proved the point of Amida's vow.

It is not controversial that Rennyō's commitment to women was very strong and effective in terms of his organization. In the end Rennyō's ambiguity was one of creating an effective organization that fit the society of his day (which meant exercising patriarchal authority and hereditary succession), in the interests of spreading a religious teaching theoretically about inward equality, salvation and subjectivity.

Still the question lingers, why did Rennyō's rhetoric so clearly change away from Shinran's, that is, why did the tropes oriented to male and female become so relatively distinguished in a way they had not been in Shinran's nearly-neutral texts? As indicated by Bloom and Matsumura, the explanation maintained by a substantial number of scholars is that Rennyō was dealing with and expressing changes in Japanese society, particularly the expansion of patriarchal values. For example, Hanafusa (1984) situates Rennyō in the history of changing family structures. Hongan-ji was subject to the evolution of Japanese family types in the direction of patriarchy as originally proposed by pioneering feminist Takamure Itsue 高群逸枝. The work of sociologist Morioka Kiyomi (1962) on Shin-shū and the *ie* system reinforced this point: it was Hongan-ji which had to respond to the social evolution of the *ie*, not vice versa. The institutions of Shin's own leadership reflected such changes, such as the process by which marriage became male-lineage-oriented and temples normatively came to be based on that type of relationship. Tanokura (1991) offers a related line of analysis, arguing that Rennyō should be treated on his own separately from Shinran. Referring to the history of modern feminism Tanokura summarizes the perspective of Takamure Itsue which he also takes as his departure point. He adopts Taira's observation that Hōnen and Shinran have little to say on women and that socially their era was still an era of relative female freedom; but then comes Zonkaku and the following spread of patriarchy. Tanokura notes how various scholars have made differing interpretations of the shift in Rennyō's language. Kasahara suggested that the *nyonin shōki* emphasis was a kind of replacement for *henjō nanshi* as an expression stressing how women could be liberated despite their gender. Minamoto Junko reflected the idea that "women" represented Rennyō and all people together. A third idea is that Rennyō reflected in his language his own self-consciousness of sexual sin in marriage. Tanokura does not like any of these three explanations: instead, his emphasis is that Rennyō was responding to his specific audience under changing sociological circumstances. Following Takamure's analysis, the pattern of *ie* formation and *yometori* 嫁取

(virilocal) marriages was becoming stronger in the fifteenth century, creating conditions altering the former degree of freedom and subjectivity for women. According to this analysis (or apologetic), the trope of obstacles and submissions was a way to reconnect the Buddhist language to the actual conditions of women living in an increasingly restrictive society.

If Shinran's is the first, Zonkaku's the second, and Rennyō's the third, the fourth phase of Shin Buddhist language about women is found in Tokugawa period literature, which has been surveyed by Kasahara (1983) and Oguri (1973 and 2002). Kasahara (1983: 333-391) examined three genres of documents from the Edo period, letters written by Hongan-ji heads, doctrinal popularization literature, and *den* 伝 literature recounting idealized biographies of persons.

As in the case of Rennyō, communications to women are found in correspondence from the hereditary heads of Hongan-ji. Kasahara selected a number of examples. A letter from the head Ryōnyō 良如 (1612-1662) mentions obstacles and obediences, but lightly, for the emphasis is on universal *shinjin*. A passage from Jūnyō 住如 (1673-1739) brings up heavier criticism of women: heavy karma, doubt, the need for spiritual reinforcement provided by the Thirty-fifth Vow and *henjō nanshi*, and the need for good behavior on the part of women. A letter to a woman's *kō* 講 (group formed in a local temple congregation) from Honnyō 本如 (1778-1826) (many letters survive from him) follows Rennyō's language closely: women have obstacles and sins but Amida's compassion overcomes all. From Kōnyō 公如 (1798-1871), Kasahara took an 1832 letter on a fundraising project directed to women; the text repeats standard language of women's evils, obstacles, the Thirty-fifth Vow, and *henjō nanshi*.

A second genre was popularization literature, and Kasahara focused on a document in *dangibon* 談義本 style (a category of popular preaching texts originating in the Kamakura period) called *Nyonin kyōka-shū* 女人教化集 (Collection on Teaching to Women). Falsely attributed to Rennyō, it was, according to Kasahara, nevertheless used widely in Tokugawa-period Shin communities. In this text, the language employed is closest to Zonkaku, who is directly quoted: women are sinful, negatively evaluated, and cannot ordinarily become Buddhas; only Amida provides liberation, and it comes equally to women and men. The basic doctrine was a continuation of Zonkaku and Rennyō, with some added emphasis on *kō* 孝 (filial piety).

The third genre is *den* biographical literature. Among these was a kind of *kinsei ōjō-den* 近世往生伝 (Early Modern Biographies on Pure Land Birth), the editing of which was associated especially with a branch of Shin-shū called the Senjūji-ha 専修寺. A number of the episodes have women as the main characters. Rather than distinctive Shin doctrinal language, the wording is more like Jōdo school language, and focuses more on an ideal of female behavior as bending and compassionate

rather than on tropes of female defectiveness. The context seems to have been an appeal to the *bakufu*'s conservative idea of social responsibility and political subservience.

Further apparent expressions of congruence with the values of the *bakufu* regime also appeared in the well-known *Myōkōnin-den* 妙好人伝 (Records of Exemplary Shin-shū Followers) collections, which are quite specifically Shin Buddhist. While these stories, whose one hundred and fifty-seven figures include a number of women in the main collection, are quite multi-sided and complex, they also tend to promote "conservative values." In the case of women this means particularly values of filial piety and sexual reserve. The typical *myōkōnin* personality featured unconditional obedience to the social structure, self-sacrifice, self-blame for one's own fate, extreme honesty, acceptance of one's position, and hard work. Kasahara chose six examples of women *myōkōnin* for commentary; in these, the usual tropes of women's sins and obstacles appear, but the more prominent aspect is conservative, gendered ideas of behavior in line with official expectations about social morality. *Nyonin ōjō* doctrine in this period had multiple channels of delivery, including preaching, pilgrimage, and printed publications. Shin teaching tended to combine references to women's disadvantages, a constant emphasis on the orthodox idea of unconditional *shinjin*, and a degree of promotion of ideal behavior which was clearly gendered (women's qualities were supposed to be compassion, self-discipline, honesty and gentleness).

Oguri examined the image of ideal females from the perspective of texts such as the *Onna daigaku* 女大学 (Greater Learning for Women) as well as the *Myōkōnin-den*. According to her analysis, on the religious side, Shin-shū's *Myōkōnin-den* depiction of women was a powerful model, and probably the "official" one for Shin-shū of the era. *Myōkōnin-den* literature was related to other works exhorting the common people (*Ryōmin-den* 良民伝) promoted by the late-Edo-period *bakufu*. The desired idea of women as exemplars of filial piety (*kō*) was a major aspect of these exhortations. Such literature thus includes for example the *Kanai jidan* 家内示談 (Household Agreements, by an author named Ryūjun 竜潤), a set of teachings for women which was divided into sections for different types of female audiences. The main points were *shin* or religious faith; *kō* (filial piety) towards parents (meaning especially probably respectful caretaking towards in-laws); and "chastity" (probably sexual decency towards the husband).

It should be emphasized that Edo Shin-based texts are also normally saturated with standard Shin boilerplate language about *shinjin* and so on, which is to say the ideas at least superficially were firmly planted in a Shin Buddhist, not a Confucian, psychological framework. Nevertheless, at the same time, this type of communication was strongly flavored by the moral "add-ons" which had not been so much part of the tradition before the later Tokugawa period, particularly the promotions of filial piety, sexual discipline, an ethic of hard work, and freedom from desire.

Oguri clearly sees the texts as products of a historical situation. Late Tokugawa society was unsettled, even after the reactionary Kansei 寛政 Reforms of the 1790s. The *bakufu*'s promotion of conservative theories about women was part of its complex of reactions to a socio-political situation over which it was losing its former sense of control. The support of the Hongan-ji establishment for the promotion of *myōkōnin* stories (about both women and men) was an aspect of the temple system's own conservative, self-protective official response to the unsettled times; beyond this a kind of emergent "middle-class" orientation at the grass roots might also have been at work. In some contrast with the above treatments, however, it is also possible to engage the *Myōkōnin-den* without being at all struck by any special treatment of women as a quality of the literature; rather, in such readings, mainstream doctrines of *shinjin* come to the fore as the primary message after all. Furthermore, sheer diversity of narrative was a feature of both the *Myōkōnin-den* and the earlier *Ōjō-den*. (Bathgate 2007, especially 275, 293)

In the Tokugawa phase, even more obviously than in the case of Rennyō, Shin language was a reflection of the androcentric tendency of its times. To a certain extent, in spite of the social conditions, the tradition retained a range of modulations within itself, ranging from the distinctive gender-neutral attitude of Shinran to the responsive sympathy of Rennyō to the more generic and misogynist-sounding language of Zonkaku. The teaching was not completely consistent from a logical or psychological standpoint, and remained the product of centuries of adaptation in Japanese society that was both diverse and interactive. Presumably real women in actual fact made their own receptions of the doctrines. Despite such qualifications, a great deal of the language had settled into a stereotyped, matured dramatic opposition of tropes pitting female hopelessness against universal liberation.²⁰ Since this melodramatic structure had been ripened for a couple of centuries in a specifically Shin Buddhist context, it had certainly acquired a formulaic quality.

Still, probably the actual reception of the Confucian-sounding parts of the language can be doubted. There used to be a long-standing assumption that the majority of the commoner public of the Edo-period were living in *ie* households which received the exhortatory Confucian messages of the regime in a naïve, obedient way. This sort of approach still seems to appear for example in Sugano (2003), who apparently takes the position that almost all Tokugawa people were involved in *ie* and were subject to the related Confucian ideology. However, hypotheses about any Confucian naïveté of Edo-period women should be formulated in view of broader patterns of evidence on Edo-period non-samurai women's social history.

20. Cf. Yoshida (2002), who explains how the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* too has a dramatic structure involving a rhetorical combination of both misogyny and promise of Buddhahood.

Questions of subjectivity persist. When and how did this Shin Buddhist imaginary speak to women in the Tokugawa, not all of whom were desperate or severely oppressed? Did this language add to their secondary statuses, or help them cope with it? All that is really apparent is that *myōkōnin* and women together share in the *trope* of the subaltern and deprecated and self-deprecating, the existential lowliness of which is paradoxically reversed in value in the life of faith. Social hierarchy interacts at least *metaphorically* with the mind of faith in complex, paradoxical ways. (Bathgate 2007)

Towards Further Research

This article has aimed not at reaching fixed conclusions, but at problematizing issues, and must end with the hesitant observation that—at least with the kind of evidence used here—it may not be possible to definitively answer certain questions.

It can probably be assumed that Shin Buddhist language was performing something that was valued by Shin women members. There is plenty of evidence that Shin Buddhism was usually a member-driven institution in which the priests often had a strongly interactive relationship with parishioners. The kinds of rhetoric that persisted over long periods of time were the kinds that “sold,” i.e. remained meaningful and useful to members. Since this is the case, the more subtle challenge is to explain *why* a rather dramatized, polarized religious rhetoric, one heightening both the mood of radical disadvantage and the mood of radical liberation for women, was sustained for centuries. It would have been interpretively plausible, both in philosophical theory and in terms of the actual flexibility of the handling of the textual tradition, to drop almost all the critique of the female.

An obvious hypothesis is that the larger context of premodern Japanese life (a context beyond the power of any Buddhist thinkers to control even if they had wished to do so) constantly reinforced in various phases over time some sense of female disadvantage which the Shin teachings were more or less *required* to specially address. In addition, in many parts of Japan where Shin culture was not dominant, Shin teachings also faced a constant background pressure from more common or generic attitudes towards women and pollution. It is hard to distinguish if the religion is *creating* a situation of female spiritual unease or *responding* to a situation of female spiritual unease; in other words it is a recapitulation of the old Pure Land ambiguity about whether the teachings are engaged with *description* or *prescription* of the female situation, and whether anything could have been done to cut through the negative feedback loop in the premodern biosocial context anyway.

Shin language often sounds subordinating, but there may be a gap between the appearances of that language and the toughness, diversity and self-definition of a great many Japanese women as they must be assessed from the standpoint of the general social history. The subjectivity of individual women and their reactions to

the embedded ambiguity of Shin teachings is never transparent. As suggested above, there were multiple receptions available, probably even during the Tokugawa period: birth in a rather concretely conceived Pure Land necessarily as a male; birth there optionally as a male; birth as a female (ignoring the idea of *henjō nanshi*); or the more elevated understanding that proper *shinjin* would lead to karmic dissolution into the formless and the end of gender altogether. The evidence suggests not only that all of these ideas were circulating in the Edo period, but also that the Hongan-ji elites heavily preferred that their members grasp Shin teaching in its higher, Shinranian modality, which neutralized gender discrimination at some abstract level at least.

Further clarification of such problems may depend on the discovery and utilization of new kinds of evidence about the premodern period, such as diaries.

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