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the Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū*

Jessica Starling





# Guardians of the Buddha's Home

*Domestic Religion in  
the Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū*

**Jessica Starling**



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*Cover art:* A *bōmori* watches as her son (the *jūshoku*) performs the morning service.

## ***Contents***

<b>vii</b>	Series Editor's Preface
<b>ix</b>	Acknowledgments
<b>1</b>	INTRODUCTION
<b>21</b>	<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> A FAMILY OF CLERICS
<b>35</b>	<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> STAYING AT HOME AS BUDDHIST PROPAGATION: The Domestic Life of the Temple
<b>63</b>	<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> HOME ECONOMICS: Stewardship of the Buddha's Goods
<b>81</b>	<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b> SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS IN THE DISCIPLINING OF <i>BŌMORI</i>
<b>107</b>	<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b> WIVES IN FRONT OF THE ALTAR
<b>129</b>	<b>CHAPTER SIX</b> EQUALITY AND FREEDOM IN THE ŌTANI-HA
<b>155</b>	CONCLUSION
<b>159</b>	Glossary
<b>161</b>	Notes
<b>171</b>	Works Cited
<b>179</b>	Index



## *Series Editor's Preface*

**EVERY STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE BUDDHISM WILL** need to engage with the concepts and approach put forth in this book. In her pioneering study of temple wives (*bōmori*), Jessica Starling offers a comprehensive investigation of contemporary temple Buddhism that moves beyond male priests and takes in the marvelous totality of the temple's domestic sphere. Starling's exhaustive fieldwork focuses on the domestic labor of temples, allowing her to demonstrate how polishing ritual implements, preparing boxed lunches, and serving tea all constitute vital aspects of both temple life and Buddhist propagation.

Here is an intimate portrait of Japanese Buddhism that locates temple wives at the center of the action. By viewing *bōmori* as religious professionals and their activities as vital to the larger mission of Shin temples, Starling invites us "back stage" and thus opens up a previously neglected but foundational arena of temple activity. This refocused perspective on temple wives encourages us to extend ideas of Buddhist teachings and propagation to include the material objects, economic activities, family obligations, biological imperatives, and institutional constraints that shape temple Buddhism in Japan today.



## *Acknowledgments*

Such is the benevolence of Amida's great compassion,  
That we must strive to return it, even to the breaking of our bodies;  
Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers,  
That we must endeavor to repay it, even to our bones becoming dust.

—“*Ondokusan*”

**IT SHOULD BE CLEAR FROM THE CENTRAL** thesis of this book that I am well aware my work is the product of a large number of serendipitous connections, dear friendships, and unseen support. Although I cannot hope to exhaust the list of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, I will try to name at least a few of the most prominent contributors to this work. All shortcomings are, of course, my own.

I would like first of all to thank my graduate adviser, Paul Groner, for taking a chance on me as a clueless graduate student and giving me the academic training, intellectual freedom, and unconditional support that allowed me to grow into a scholar.

Paul was also kind enough to send me to the gifted teachers at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Studies, who gave me the competence in Japanese to be able to speak and listen to my informants, and to translate what they told me into the pages of this book. Special thanks must go to Tanaka-sensei, my patient and generous Japanese tutor in Kyoto.

My fieldwork in Japan was made possible by financial support from the Japan Foundation, the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad program, and the Ōtani-ha Pure Land Studies Fellowship. Officials from both Nishi Honganji and Higashi Honganji were extremely generous in their cooperation and support for my research. Two individuals in Kyoto, Henry Adams and Michael Conway, provided immeasurable help as well as treasured friendship. Ōtani University generously hosted me for my initial dissertation research, providing me with library access and a glorious desk at which countless words were read, transcribed, and written.

Stephen Covell's 2005 book, and in particular his formulation of the category of "Temple Buddhism," opened up for me a host of new questions and a world of research possibilities. I know I am not alone. Mark Rowe has been like my own personal battery charger—every conversation leaves me more excited, more able, and more confident to do this work. Other important mentors and interlocutors during my graduate study and later research include Heather Blair, Mark Blum, James Dobbins, Daniel Friedrich, Richard Jaffe, Noriko Kawahashi, Jessica Main, Levi McLaughlin, Matt McMullen, Matt Mitchell, Hillary Pederson, and Jolyon Thomas. These scholars know well the highs and lows of this work and how important colleagues are in sustaining one in it, so they will know how much their support has meant to me.

I must also acknowledge every provider of childcare for my children between 2008 to 2018, including but not limited to the two Nakamura-senseis at Funaoka Hoikuen, Sarah Riggs Stapleton, my parents, Miss Shonda and Miss Kennedy at UCF Creative School for Children, Malinda Bass, Mustard Seed Preschool, Eva Sharf, Honganji Yōchien, and Richmond Elementary School.

My time at the University of California, Berkeley, as a Shinjō Itō postdoctoral fellow in Japanese Buddhism provided me with a number of things that made this book better: a year to reflect on my dissertation material while benefiting from a stimulating intellectual atmosphere; a well-stocked library; and an occasion to present my ideas as they were developing, post-dissertation, to an engaged and thoughtful audience. I would like to thank Robert Sharf in particular for his support that year.

Lewis & Clark College, where I have taught since 2013, has provided various forms of support for the completion of this book, including research funds, a pre-tenure sabbatical, and a culture of protecting junior faculty from doing too much committee work. My colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies and the Asian Studies program especially have been a constant source of good advice, support, humor, and inspiration. The Scholarly Writing Retreat at Lewis & Clark, which I attended for three summers in a row, provided me with the structure, accountability, and community that I needed to complete the most difficult parts of the revision of this manuscript. Special thanks are due to two of my students from Lewis & Clark, Colette Willard and Carly Houk, for reading various drafts of the manuscript, giving me their honest feedback, and keeping me focused on this project.

Everyone at the University of Hawai'i Press, in particular Stephanie Chun and Barbara Folsom, have been wonderful to work with and have helped me to improve this manuscript immeasurably.

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to take their grandchildren and great-grandchildren eight thousand miles away from them in order to complete my own selfish projects. Thank you, Mama Joyce.

My husband and our two children (one of whom was born just before this research began, and the other of whom joined us just before I turned in my dissertation), have been the most surprising, wonderful, undeserved blessings of my life these past ten years. Without Jason's loving support, intellectual engagement, and geographic flexibility, this project never would have begun. Without Claudia and Sam's delightful obliviousness to the importance of mommy's "work," I might never have found the focus necessary to complete this formidable project, nor the perspective to keep it from consuming me. Thank you, Claudia, for letting me miss your first lacrosse game so I could complete these final revisions.

Last on this list but first in gratitude are my informants, who, out of respect for their privacy, I will not name. I am grateful for their continued friendship, and I am in constant awe and inspiration of their unbounded patience and generosity.



## Introduction

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**HALF AN HOUR BEFORE MURYŌJI TEMPLE'S SPRING** equinox ritual began, the sliding paper door leading out of the main hall (*hondō*) slid open abruptly and two preschool-aged sisters darted out, scampering bare-foot down the narrow hallway leading to the guest reception room. Shooed out of this room by their grandmother, they finally toppled, squealing, out into the entryway, where the shoes of parishioners were steadily accumulating below the bottom step. The older sister had won their game of tag and in the process managed to make her younger sister cry. The two girls retreated to the spacious temple kitchen, where an army of women was preparing the vegetarian feast (*otoki*) to be served to guests after the service. One of these women was the girls' pregnant mother, who was kneeling at a low table in the dining area, along with several female parishioners, arranging sweet beans, stewed vegetables, and other vegetarian fare in individual lunch boxes.

As the two girls elbowed each other in a struggle to climb into their mother's lap at the same time, she patiently placed her chopsticks on the table and began to dry her younger daughter's tears. The elder daughter, who had just turned five, soon lost interest in the tussle and turned her attention to the massive television set, whose screen was split four ways between three camera feeds of the temple grounds and a television broadcast of a popular cartoon. Her sister, who was just three, continued to sob, but then asked her mother if she could have another of the treats brought by one of the parishioner volunteers. After devouring their individually wrapped sponge cakes, the two girls bounded upstairs to their playroom. The family's residence was located on the second floor atop this sprawling industrial-sized kitchen and the adjoining carport.

The children's grandmother sat in the guest reception room, where notices for temple events and newsletters from Higashi Honganji, the headquarters of the Buddhist sect to which the temple belonged, were spread on the low table for visitors to pick up on their way to the temple's main hall. The grandmother and one of the temple's lay leaders were chatting with the recently arrived visiting priest who would deliver the sermon after the service; he was an old family friend and the resident priest of another temple. When he was finished with his tea and snack, she gathered his dishes onto a lacquered tray and carried them into the kitchen, where she rejoined the manual labor of preparing the communal meal. Shortly before the service was to begin, she slipped on her priestly robes and collar and went out into the hall to ring the bell that marked the start of the service. She entered the main hall and knelt by the sliding door, pointing out empty seats to a few late arrivals.

Her son, the temple's resident priest (*jūshoku*), emerged from behind the altar and the attendees grew quiet. He performed the liturgy alone, kneeling on the right side of the inner altar and intoning excerpts from Shinran's (1173–1263) written works before the main image of Amida (Skt. Amitābha) Buddha. Some thirty parishioners, an even mix of men and women averaging around sixty years old, looked on from their rows of low seats. One man, the lay leader of the congregation, had passed out copies of the reading that would follow the main ritual, one of Rennyo's (1415–1499) collected letters.<sup>1</sup> He now knelt by himself in front of the congregation but still outside of the inner altar. There was a liturgy book under each seat, and many parishioners read or recited the *Shōshinge* (The hymn of true faith, a section of Shinran's writings that is used frequently in liturgies) and Shinran's *Jōdo Wasan* (Verses on the pure land) along with the priest.

Just after the ritual started, the young mother and her two daughters entered the main hall as quietly as they could manage, the two girls wearing pink prayer beads around their wrists and squirming quietly in their mother's lap. They listened to their father's chanting for as long as they could bear to before darting out through the sliding doors as their mother let them go to play in the kitchen. Their younger sister, due to be born in a few weeks, was still just a large bulge under her mother's tunic.

This snapshot of the Nagai family's life in the temple is similar to what one would witness when attending any major event at a parish temple in Japan today.<sup>2</sup> The scene is more domestic than monastic: the obvious manifestations of Buddhist doctrine (for instance, the chanting of Shinran's *Shōshinge* and the melodic reading of Rennyo's letters), and even its more overtly religious material forms (the main image of Amida, the incense, the clerical robes), are surprisingly intermingled with more domestic activities like the serving of tea, the preparing of a midday meal, and the rearing of children. The boundary between the religious and the domestic spheres of

the temple—represented in this scene by the constantly opening and closing paper door that separates the main hall from the communal dining room, the guest-receiving room, and the kitchen—is far more permeable than most scholarly studies of Buddhism would lead us to believe.

This book is a study of the position of the temple wife, whose life illustrates this permeability better than perhaps any other type of Buddhist practitioner.<sup>3</sup> It will address several important issues in the study of Buddhism and gender in contemporary Japan. First, it highlights the integral role of family as the connective tissue of Buddhist communities: family is instrumental in providing religious education and, in Shin Buddhist doctrinal formulations, in facilitating the fruition of a person's karmic seeds. As an intimate study of nonelite practitioners of Buddhism, it also sheds light on the way doctrinal ideas are embodied through rituals, human relationships, ethical decisions, and autobiographical narratives. In bringing the temple wife's activities into the purview of scholarly study, the book integrates discussions of gender, family, and the material-economic dimensions of religious life into the scholarly study of Buddhism.

### Women in Buddhism

For roughly the first century of its existence, the field of Buddhist studies tended to define its object of study in relation to Buddhist doctrine and texts (Lopez 1995). It has long been a challenge for scholars to bring women fully into the picture of a Buddhist tradition so conceived, however, because of the dearth of texts written by Buddhist women prior to the modern period. Most male-authored Buddhist texts are relatively ambivalent toward women, if not overtly misogynistic. To cite but one example from the Pali canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the *Anguttara Nikaya* has the Buddha saying, “Monks, if ever one could properly say that something is in all respects a snare of Māra [the Buddhist tempter and god of death], one can surely say of women that they are in all respects a snare of Māra” (Wilson 1996, p. 71). Liz Wilson's 1996 study, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Hagiographic Literature*, catalogs many more instances of the demonization of women in Pali hagiographies, monastic codes, and meditation guides for monks. Passages such as these have been much discussed by scholars, with most surmising that they reflect a kind of “ascetic misogyny,” an attempt to inculcate disgust in their male audience toward women's bodies the better to successfully overcome desire and adhere to a life of celibate renunciation (Sponberg 1992). It has been difficult for scholars who rely on textual sources to do more than speculate—if they even bother to do so—about possible female reception of these prescriptive texts.<sup>4</sup>

In some respects, the Mahayana tradition, with its newly conceived

goal of becoming a perfectly enlightened buddha (Skt. *samyak-saṃbuddha*) and its doctrine that women were unable to reach this goal while still inhabiting a female form, provides even more fuel for the idea of Buddhism as a misogynistic tradition. For East Asian Buddhists, the two most widely referenced examples of androcentrism in Indian Mahayana scriptures are the Dragon Girl of the *Lotus Sutra* and the thirty-fifth vow of the Buddha Amitābha (J. Amida) of the *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*. In chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sutra*, a seven-year-old girl, princess of the underwater dragon kingdom, famously transforms herself into a man before attaining buddhahood. This highly suggestive scriptural episode gave rise to a rich interpretive tradition in Japan (see, e.g., Yoshida 2002, Moerman 2005, and Abe 2015).<sup>5</sup> The *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* is one of three canonical scriptures of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, of which the Jōdo Shinshū is a part. In this text, the Buddha Amitābha, when he was a young bodhisattva embarking on the long and arduous journey to attain enlightenment, promised that, when he became a buddha, if female devotees “upon hearing my name have serene thoughts of faith, generate in their mind the aspiration to attain awakening, [and] feel disgust at their female nature,” they would no longer suffer the fate of being reborn as women (Gomez 1996, p. 74). Luis Gomez, who produced the translation just cited, explains in a footnote that the vow “is a classical example of early Indian misogyny” (p. 232). Gomez’s fellow philologist Paul Harrison hesitates to conclude that the vow is precisely misogynistic, noting that the matter of whether and in what sense sexual differences exist at all in the Pure Land is actually quite ambiguous in the Indian textual tradition. He admits in a footnote, however, that “getting women themselves to loathe the fact that they are women and thus become, as it were, self-hating is a classic misogynist move” (1998, p. 568). Harrison adds that “the vow is an explicit illustration of the principle that hegemonic discourses work in part by inducing the oppressed to appropriate the instruments of their own subordination” (p. 568). For my purposes, what is important to emphasize here is that, from a bibliocentric perspective, Mahayana Buddhism’s prospects for women are fairly grim. In Bernard Faure’s influential 2003 study, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender*, he writes that “given that Buddhism is essentially a discourse on salvation and holiness,” it “is indeed relentlessly misogynistic, but as far as misogynist discourses go, it is one of the most flexible and open to multiplicity and contradiction” (pp. 8–9). In other words, if Buddhism is understood to be a set of texts or a coherent discourse or ideology, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the tradition itself is misogynistic; it is harder still to determine how women before the twentieth century understood the misogynistic discourses that are so glaring in the tradition’s texts.

In Japan, prominent male monks’ deployment of doctrinal concepts like *henjō nanshi* (a woman’s transformation into a man in order to attain

buddhahood) and *goshō sanshō* (the five karmic obstructions and three objects of obedience for women—father, husband, and son) in sermons and commentaries has often been the starting point for thinking about women’s place in the Buddhist tradition. A substantial body of work by Japanese scholars exists surrounding the subject of women’s salvation (*nyonin jōbutsu* or *nyonin ōjō* in the case of rebirth in the Pure Land); it is almost all centered on doctrinal or popular texts composed by male priests (for example, Kasahara 1975, Oguri 1987, and Taira 1992).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps understandably, scholars who take a textual approach to the tradition have been at a loss to explain women’s participation in the religion as anything other than an internalization and reproduction of the terms of their own subjugation. There are a number of problems with this approach, however. Focusing on doctrinal or prescriptive elements of the tradition assumes not only that most women have learned and understood the doctrine propounded by scholar-monks but also that they have believed and internalized it. It also tends to cast Buddhist women into one of two opposing categories: either they are unconscious victims of a misogynistic discourse, or they are heroic resisters asserting their agency against a patriarchal structure.

Some historical studies of Buddhism in Japan have sought to think beyond the prescriptive literature that is available to us, augmenting it with nondoctrinal, female-authored sources and asking questions about how Buddhist women would have learned about doctrine and how they actually understood such teachings to relate to their own condition.<sup>7</sup> The scholarship of Nishiguchi Junko (1987), Katsuura Noriko (1989, 1995), and Barbara Ruch (2002) helped to shift the focus from the normative presentations of women in scriptural sources and male-authored exegesis to the various ways in which women have made use of Buddhist symbols and institutions to further their own agendas. James Dobbin’s 2006 study of Shinran’s wife Eshinni’s (1182–1268) letters, for instance, revealed a surprisingly complicated relationship between prescriptive or “idealized” forms of Buddhism such as those found in the writings of the Japanese sectarian founders, and Buddhism-as-lived in the context of practitioners’ everyday experiences and concerns. Lori Meeks has observed that nuns in the medieval Hokkeji convent employed such strategies as “talking past” the elements of doctrine that were disadvantageous to them, meanwhile marshaling the social and ritual resources available to them as nuns to secure salvation for themselves and their patrons and to ensure the viability of their monastic community (2010). Gina Cogan’s fine-grained historical study revealed the complicated strategies and agendas of the early modern princess-nun Bunchi (2014), and Barbara Ambros’ textbook on women in Japanese religions similarly attempted to capture the nuances and ambiguity involved in women’s participation in androcentric institutions and their consumption of misogynistic religious literature (2015).

Ethnographic studies have a special advantage in this regard: it often turns out that the norms found in religious texts do not exhaustively account for what is normative for women in everyday life. Studies of Buddhist women by Arai (1999, 2011), Gutschow (2004), Falk (2007), and Salgado (2013) have addressed the lacuna in a body of scholarship once preoccupied by male-authored depictions of women and the female gender in Buddhist monastic codes, hagiography, and doctrinal texts. These authors focus instead on the complexities of women's active negotiation of the Buddhist tradition on the ground.

In the last decade or so, however, a critical divide has emerged in studies of Buddhist nuns, especially—but not only—those in Southeast Asia. Wei-Yi Cheng, in her book *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka* (2007), exposed some of the orientalist assumptions of many feminist studies of Buddhism, especially those produced in the 1990s. She cites Donaldson and Kwok's observation that feminist studies of religion may have the effect of "replicating the colonial gaze in the name of serving a feminist agenda" (Donaldson and Kwok 2002; cited in Cheng 2007, p. 7). In other words, scholarship with a prescriptive feminist bent often casts non-Western women as an oppressed group in need of Enlightened Western intervention. Perhaps the most frequent recipient of charges of orientalism is Rita Gross' 1993 book *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction*. Though the book itself is a critical-constructive study of the Buddhist tradition by Gross, an American Buddhist woman, Cheng reports feeling alienated by "the occasional East/West, Us/Other binary rhetoric in the book," and notes that Gross' "assumption that only Western Buddhists are capable or aware of the need for feminist transformation of Buddhism...echoes Orientalist rhetoric that subjugates Asian Buddhists" (p. 5). Although Cheng's stated aim in conducting sociological research was to critique Western feminists' one-sided accounts of Asian Buddhist women, she admits that she was unable to let go of her own feminist principles when interviewing women and writing about them in her book. Cheng laments: "the whole purpose of conducting this research through the method of interview is to listen to Asian Buddhist nuns' voices. [But] my research subjects [were] partially silenced because I forced them to speak about issues raised by Western feminists, rather than beginning with their own agenda" (p. 190).

Nirmala Salgado, in her 2013 book *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*, tries to do better. Her chapter "Decolonizing Female Renunciation" exposes Western scholarship's tendency to "focus on an (ideal) consciousness that is not central to the subjects of study. That consciousness speaks, rather, to second- and third-wave feminists who seek meaning in seemingly universal categories" (p. 47). Though Salgado is fiercely critical of what she reads as Rita Gross' condescending

view of Asian Buddhist women as being in need of Western feminist intervention in order to be truly “liberated,” she also finds fault with historians and ethnographers who have a less explicitly feminist agenda. For instance, she critiques Tess Bartholomeusz’ 1994 book *Women under the Bo Tree* about female renunciants in Sri Lanka for repeating Gross’ mistake of relying too heavily on ancient texts to define the Buddhist tradition. Salgado feels that Bartholomeusz gives too little weight to the everyday practices and concerns of her informants and instead “relies on texts to speak for the contemporary realities of female renunciants” (p. 32).

The crux of this controversy is the uneven power dynamic inherent in the production of discourse by Western scholars about non-Western women. In the past, not only has scholarly discourse about Asian Buddhist women been based largely upon prescriptive texts, but it has also hinged upon notions of agency rooted in Western liberalism— notions that are often presumed to be universal and natural among human beings everywhere. Talal Asad cautions that scholars should not assume “that a proper understanding of agency requires us to place it within the framework of a secular history of freedom from all coercive control, a history in which everything can be made, and pleasure always innocently enjoyed. . . . Agency need not be conceptualized in terms of individual self-empowerment and resistance, or of utopian history” (2003, p. 73).<sup>8</sup> Such formulations of freedom and agency do not always align with the proclaimed goals and beliefs of religious subjects, nor is it always possible for them to attain Western liberal ideals within their actual lived conditions. As Salgado writes, “How easy it is to forget that one never lives one’s life apart from the condition in which one finds oneself. Norms—if there are such things—exist as part of the conditions in which people live, not as superimposed ideals that one can ‘choose’ apart from these conditions” (p. 39).

A scholar’s best hope of avoiding inauthentic representations of Buddhist women, such as the ones Salgado criticizes, is to try to enter into the everyday lives of her informants with an honest sense of humility in order to discover the categories and concepts that operate for them on a practical level. Specifically, scholars must take care not to import Western liberal notions of what freedom and agency should look like or to make assumptions about whether Buddhism will be an oppressive or a liberating force in a woman’s life. Taking an ethnographic approach has allowed me to dig into those everyday conditions and observe what elements of the Buddhist tradition were most salient in women’s construction of narratives, identities, and meanings. For example, most of my temple wife informants have been exposed to feminist ideas through their peer networks and Japanese and Western media; as a result, doctrinal concepts like women’s transformation into men and the five obstacles and three obediences are the subject of many searching discussions at workshops for temple wives.

At the same time, in various venues and at various times, I observed the active and intentional cultivation of Buddhist subjectivity and the embrace of Buddhist frameworks for understanding human contingency. Many of my informants' narratives of their life journeys draw upon Shin Buddhist doctrinal concepts and values such as humility and gratitude. They see their encounters with hardship, blessings, mentors, and the like as signposts affirming that the Buddha's compassion is at work in their lives, and they strive to be responsive to it. Of course, Buddhism is not the only resource at their disposal in constructing meaning and identity, nor is it the only source of ideological or institutional inequality in their lives. Conducting fieldwork and getting to know women over the course of several years allowed me to observe more broadly what cultural resources—what strategies and tools for action (Swidler 1986)—temple wives must choose from, and how and why they choose Buddhist ones.

Finally, scholarship on women in Buddhism has overwhelmingly focused on those women who can be categorized as nuns or renunciants as opposed to laywomen. Salgado's recent work on Buddhist nuns has problematized the tidy dichotomy of "lay" versus "monastic" into which Buddhist practitioners are often swept. Instead, she points out that, even in Sri Lanka—a place where scholars often seek the "purest" form of Buddhism closest to that practiced at the time of the Buddha himself—renunciation does not always correlate precisely with becoming a monastic, "nor is it defined strictly in terms of precepts that practitioners observe" (2013, p. 55). Salgado suggests that, despite the narratives scholars tend to give of Buddhist renunciation, "transcending the lay realm" was not necessarily a goal of her informants, nor did the nuns she interviewed seek to completely sever ties with their natal families.

Temple wives conspicuously defy clear distinctions between lay and monastic; they also defy the etic dichotomy of public/private that is often used to assess the value of women's roles. As Salgado points out, feminist scholars working on Asian Buddhism have tended to assume that "freedom" in the liberal feminist sense is "ideally actualized outside the private sphere—for example, in the educational system and in the area of career, which are usually outside the home" (2013, p. 52). Thus, in a liberal feminist reading, unless Buddhist women can renounce their domestic obligations and enter the "public" world of men, economic value, and status, they cannot be freely exercising their will. Studying women who are enmeshed in, rather than removed from, familial relationships while carrying out their religious activities, as I do here, renders a richer, more nuanced picture of power and freedom as women negotiate them in the context of interpersonal relationships.

In addition to illuminating women's religious subjectivity, my focus on the experiences of the female half of the clerical partnership of Jōdo Shin-