

Tracing the Itinerant Path. Jishū Nuns of Medieval Japan, by Caitilin J. Griffiths. University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 214pp., Hb. £68.95 (\$65.00). ISBN-13: 9780824859367.

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Tracing the Itinerant Path is an informative examination of wandering *jishū* groups in medieval Japan that combines a keen eye for detail with comprehensive descriptions. It is, however, accompanied by a sense of repetition and a lack of further analysis of the subject matter as well as the implications of the applied theoretical approach.

As a whole, the author focuses on a topic that has been neglected within research on medieval Japanese history and thus contributes a wealth of new materials and perspectives to the current discussion that is leaning towards developments in vernacular Buddhism. Caitilin J. Griffiths focuses mainly on the groups affiliated with the Yūgyō school and their growth in popularity, and more specifically on the roles of *jishū* nuns within these groups and loose organizations, as they facilitated the spread of Pure Land Buddhism. She wishes to make a clear distinction between these itinerant groups, *jishū* 時衆, and the Ji-sect 時宗, famously associated with Ippen as its founder, and thus contributes a valuable perspective on lesser-known developments within that tradition. In roughly chronological order, she follows the evolution of the first wandering *jishū* groups from the early Kamakura period, through the establishment of permanent practice halls and growing warrior patronage, up to the institutionalized Ji-sect in the seventeenth century with its own doctrine. While revealing more information about the *jishū* groups, mostly comprised of ordinary men and women, it is through this filter that we glean more knowledge about the lives of these female practitioners, based mainly on primary sources such as letters, regulations for the monks and nuns, and records kept by the Yūgyō school leaders. Overall, it is an attempt to shift the emphasis away from the prior focus in scholarship on medieval sects and the religious practices of the elite.

Within this discussion of itinerant groups and their successive development, her aim is to demonstrate that women were active participants in the early *jishū* movement, either as members, sponsors, or leaders of practice halls (pp. 3–4). Despite the common conception of women leading fairly restricted lives in medieval times, especially as nuns, since only a few avenues were open to them to follow the spiritual path to awakening, this study demonstrates that the *jishū* nuns were, in fact, able to live quite independently: they were free to attend pilgrimages and perform rituals at their sponsors' residences; and in non-Buddhist environments such as the marketplace, women were also able to run their own businesses. This lifestyle, which the author elaborates on in detail, provided them with a means to sustain their own livelihood outside of the constraints of rank imposed upon them based on the hierarchical structure of society, and assume positions of responsibility providing them with a degree of influence (p. 71, pp. 90–92).

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Another area of concern for Griffiths is the changing attitudes of men towards their fellow female *jishū* practitioners over time. In the early stages, although a gendered bias towards women is discernible, one of her inferences is that they were treated as being generally equal, with nuns often collaborating closely with their leaders in the itinerant missions, as she calls them (pp. 28–29). However, from the fifteenth century onwards, she highlights how the status of, and opportunities for, women seem to decline in proportion to the growing institutionalization of the *jishū* movement (pp. 110–112), culminating in the complete exclusion of women from the Yūgyō practice halls in the seventeenth century (pp. 118–119). Simultaneously, this describes the distinctness of the *jishū* schools, since women were included until the sixteenth century, in contrast to the great Buddhist schools. She thereby illustrates the profound shift in attitudes in the early modern period that are visible in so many other spheres of culture and society leading up to the Meiji era and beyond, adding another aspect to consider in that period of transformation. The rewriting of history in the seventeenth century, which she notes in her analysis, is emblematic of how processes of institutionalization and the striving for influence and legitimization can impact current perceptions of the subject matter.

In her first chapter, the author applies theories of space in order to examine the gender division within these *jishū* groups and their practice halls, and to define relations between people or things within that space (pp. 22–30). Although she offers an interesting introduction to this approach, it is confined to this chapter, with other theoretical considerations appearing only sporadically in the consecutive discussion. Considering the fact that throughout the chapters she focuses on the presence of women in various ‘spaces’, which, depending on the definition, could include ‘on the road’, near the battlefields, in the marketplace, or in the community, there is no further application of her theoretical approach. This may not have been her original intention, but it seems to be a possible and viable methodology that could have led to further insights and a more stringent application of her theoretical framework. Generally remaining on a very descriptive level, Griffiths provides the reader with a very detailed account of the development of the *jishū* groups and a lot of other facts surrounding life as a member of such a group, whether monk or nun. However, a further analysis and an in-depth study of the implications based on the theoretical approach are, to my mind, lacking.

With a total of 128 pages of running text, it is a fairly short monograph, that still manages to feel repetitive and circular at times. Her line of argumentation, although roughly chronological, is not linear, making the topics seem quite disparate at times, with many points being repeated and the same terms being explained on numerous occasions. The repetitive character is epitomized by a passage that appears in the exact same wording roughly twenty pages (p. 47) after its first appearance (p. 24), which accentuates the overall sense of scarceness of content made up for by long descriptions of information that, although interesting, fail to support the general argument. One of the main aims of the book, which is expressed in the introduction, is to demonstrate the importance and presence of women, whose history has often been neglected. While she does not fail to frequently remind us

of this well-established fact and point out that they did indeed play an important role, it also becomes one of the main points in her conclusion, which could have benefitted from a new perspective. In fact, the conclusions at the end of the chapters tend to be quite speculative at times due to the nature of the source material. Nevertheless, the conclusion is presented with more detail provided by the examples used in her discussion, while highlighting the growing awareness in recent scholarship of women's roles and recent studies on their positions.

Though the repetition of her main point makes the argument appear weak, it is accompanied in the conclusion by some other themes and issues worth considering. These are mainly that a distinction needs to be made between formal Buddhism and daily practised Buddhism, since the former leads to an elite male-centric view of Buddhism, and that 'Ji-shū' or *jishū* is still very much associated with Ippen as a founder. This is mainly due to the primary interest in sects as the main constituents of medieval Japanese religion within prior scholarship, and the seventeenth century efforts to unify the groups and solidify the school's claim and position, even though there were other leaders and founders, as Griffith's study demonstrates.

Despite these points of criticism, the book is, nonetheless, a good introduction to the topic of itinerant groups, and, based on the issues it addresses, presents a valuable contribution to current research on medieval Buddhism, opening up further avenues for enquiry, also within other Buddhist sects. Based on the convincing and frequent use of primary source material, this monograph provides an interesting alternative depiction of medieval life, and illustrates the degree of independence of some women, and in certain environments, which is in stark contrast to general portrayals of the lives of women among the elites. Due to the nature of the records the author uses, women are still being perceived through a gendered lens, although she has tried her best to extract the objective facts. The appendix (pp. 129–147) provides complete translations of some of the cited material, introducing these sources to a wider audience, which present a very useful contribution and display the thoroughness of her extensive research. It is within the introduction of alternative primary sources and the portrayal of life as a member of the *jishū* groups, whether male or female, that the real value of this study lies.