

In Memoriam? Rethinking the Portrait Sculptures of Princess-Abesses Enshrined in the Dharma Hall at Shinnyoji Temple

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The portraits of nuns who served as abbesses at Japan's Buddhist imperial convents have multifarious roles and functions; likewise there were diverse circumstances surrounding their creation. Most were commissioned by family members or pupils after an abbess died as commemorative portraits, and they were treated as proxies for the deceased in memorial rituals. Some examples, however, were made according to a living abbess's request, and therefore are not simply memorial or mortuary objects. This paper will focus on a unique group of four sculptural portraits of abbesses from Hōkyōji 宝鏡寺 imperial convent that are enshrined in a hall at the Rinzai Zen temple Shinnyoji 真如寺 in Kyoto, which in addition to serving as the site for special ceremonies connected with Shōkokuji 相国寺 monastery, from the sixteenth century on became the mortuary temple (*bodaiji* 菩提寺) and burial ground for Hōkyōji abbesses.¹ It may seem odd that convent abbesses would be buried at another temple rather than at the convent itself, but there was an old tradition of conducting funerary and burial rites at designated mortuary temples, perhaps related to the desire to protect the living from the "pollution" caused by death.

Origins of Shinnyoji

The "seed" of what later evolved into Shinnyoji was a small chapel constructed by the Rinzai Zen nun Mugai Nyodai 無外如大 (1223–98) in the late thirteenth century in memory of her Chinese teacher Wuzue Zuyuan 無学祖元 (Jp. Mugaku Sogen or Bukkō Kokushi 仏光国師, 1226–85).² Previously Mugai Nyodai had founded the convent Keiaiji 景愛寺, which although no longer extant was ranked the highest among the Five Great Rinzaï Zen Convents 尼五山 in Kyoto. Hōkyōji convent was closely associated with Keiaiji and traces its spiritual Zen lineage back to Abbess Mugai Nyodai. Although Keiaiji was destroyed by a fire in 1498, the abbesses of

¹ The first Hōkyōji abbess to be buried at Shinnyoji was Kaya Rishun 花屋理春, in 1576.

² The chapel was called Shōmyakuan 正脈庵. In the fourteenth century it was expanded into a larger temple by Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351) and became affiliated with Shōkokuji.

Hōkyōji have continued to hold concurrent titles as honorary abbess of the lost ancestral convent. An interest in maintaining strong bonds with Mugai Nyodai no doubt underlay the desire for Hōkyōji abbesses to be buried at Shinnyoji.

Both Hōkyōji and Shinnyoji were destroyed during the Ōnin War (1467–77). Hōkyōji was relocated to central Kyoto, and for several decades was headed by a succession of women from the Ashikaga and other aristocratic families. In 1644, Emperor Gomizuno-o's daughter Kugon Rishō 久巖理昌 (1631–56) entered Hōkyōji as a novice and she was appointed as abbess in 1646. She died ten years later early in the first month of 1656 and was buried within a few days at Shinnyoji, which was in the process of being restored. Rishō was posthumously given the dharma name Senjuin 仙寿院. In this paper I will refer to the Hōkyōji abbesses by their dharma names.

Emperor Gomizuno-o and the Enshrining of the First Abbess Portrait Statue

Emperor Gomizuno-o decided to rebuild the Dharma hall (*hattō* 法堂) at Shinnyoji (Figure 1) so that it could serve as the site for memorial services for Senjuin and subsequent Hōkyōji abbesses. Restoration was completed in the twelfth month of 1656, and Emperor Gomizuno-o installed a portrait sculpture of his deceased daughter (Figure 2). The wood sculpture of Senjuin is mentioned in an account of



Figure 1. Dharma hall (*hattō*) at Shinnyoji.

the ceremony marking the completion of the Dharma hall recorded by the chief priest of Kinkakuji, Hōrin Jōshō 鳳林丞章 in his diary *Kakumeiki* 隔莫記 (ca. 1735–1668).³ The nearly lifesize seated image was made using the joined woodblock technique and is 63.2 cm high; the eyes are inlaid crystal (*gyokugan* 玉眼). It was coated with layers of lacquer, primer, and polychromy, which is now flaking off. Following clerical portraiture tradition, the youthful princess-abbess is seated in a chair and is represented dressed in formal robes with a surplice (*kesa* 袈裟) draped over her left shoulder and secured with a cord tied to a ring (*hekikan* 璧環). Her pose with hands clasped in prayer, presumably



Figure 2. Portrait sculpture of Senjuin (Rishō). Shinnyoji.

³ *Kakumeiki*, vol. 4, p. 156.

alluding to her piousness, may be modeled after images of the eighth-century devout noblewoman Chūjōhime 中将姫,⁴ whom Emperor Gomizuno-o promoted as a role model for his daughters. Placed in front of Senjuin is a wooden mortuary tablet (*ihai* 位牌) engraved with her posthumous name on the front and the date of her death on the back.⁵

There is a document placed inside this image recording that it was restored in 1804, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Senjuin's death. The document was temporarily removed and photographed by the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division during an examination of the sculpture in 1978 (Figure 3). The description of the Senjuin image in the book on Kyoto portrait sculpture published by the Cultural Properties Protection Division⁶ gives the year it was made as 1804, but that is incorrect because the *Kakumeiki* diary clearly records ceremonial rites carried out in front of a wooden image of Senjuin inside the newly refurbished Dharma hall at Shinnyoji in 1656.

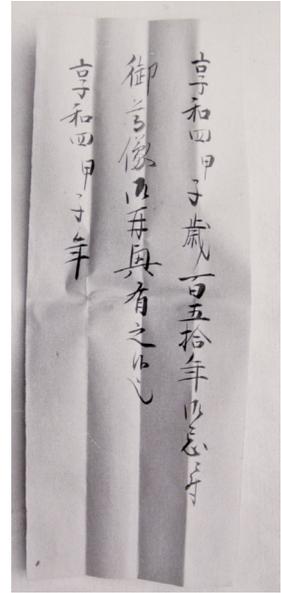


Figure 3. Document placed inside the statue of Senjuin. Photograph courtesy of the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division.

Second Portrait Statue: Abbess Gekkyōken

The second sculptural portrait of a Hōkyōji convent abbess to be placed in Shinnyoji is one representing Gekkyōken 月鏡軒 (also known by the names Gyokuzan 玉山 or Rikō 理光; d. 1681) who served as abbess prior to Senjuin (Figure 4). She is the only one of the four abbesses represented in sculpture at Shinnyoji who was not an imperial princess. The daughter of the court noble and at one time regent Takatsukasa Nobufusa 鷹司信房 (1565–1658), Gekkyōken entered Hōkyōji in 1598 at the age of five and was ordained and succeeded as abbess seven years later.⁷ She retired when Emperor Gomizuno-o's daughter was installed in 1646.



Figure 4. Portrait sculpture of Gekkyōken (Gyokuzan or Rikō). Shinnyoji.

⁴ For illustrations of Chūjōhime, see the exhibition catalogue *Taimadera: Gokuraku jōdo e no akogare* (Nara: Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 2013), pp. 88–90.

⁵ These tablets were symbolic receptacles for the spirits of the deceased, fulfilling the same function as portraits. They are usually placed on an altar or in a special niche to the side of the main altar at temples. In private homes they are kept in the family's Buddhist altar.

⁶ *Kyōto no shōzō chōkoku*, p. 302.

⁷ Evidence of the high standing of her family is the fact that her younger sister became the principal wife of Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu.

The previously mentioned *Kakumeiki* diary records that the retired Hōkyōji abbess Rikō 理光, which is the Buddhist name given to Gekkyōken when she entered the convent, had a wooden *gyakushu* 逆修 image of herself installed at Shinnyoji in the eighth month of 1660;⁸ this was twenty-one years prior to her death. *Gyakushu* literally means “reverse rites”; it was not uncommon for court nobility to commission such images, which enabled them to offer prayers and incense before a likeness of themselves while they were still alive in order to secure benefits in the next world.⁹ It seems likely that retired abbess Gekkyōken wished to be memorialized in the manner of her successor, whose portrait sculpture had been enshrined at Shinnyoji four years earlier. The image of Gekkyōken is somewhat smaller (43.5 cm) and shows the abbess seated with hands in meditational posture.

When I first visited Shinnyoji in 2007, the wooden mortuary tablet placed in front of this image had the name of a different abbess, Kōtokuin, whose sculptural portrait I will discuss next. The mortuary tablet placed in front Kōtokuin was engraved with the name of yet another abbess (Sanmajin 三摩地院). Evidently these tablets had gotten mixed up at some point, so in order to confirm the identities of all four portrait sculptures, I re-examined the sculptures, photographs and records taken during the official survey thirty years ago, temple inventories, and painted portraits of the abbesses in question preserved at Hōkyōji.

Shinnyoji temple inventories dating to the Edo and Meiji periods all identify the four wood portrait sculptures as Senjuin, Gekkyōken, Kōtokuin, and Honkakuin.¹⁰ By process of elimination, it can be ascertained that Figure 4 is Abbess Gekkyōken. When I visited Shinnyoji in June 2012 we found her mortuary tablet pushed back on the platform in between her portrait sculpture and the previous statue of Senjuin.

After her death in 1681, Gekkyōken was buried at Shinnyoji; her grave is located within the compound reserved for princess-abbesses, but is not identified with the kind of large stone marker placed by the graves of imperial family members. I found a record at Shinnyoji which describes the graves of the four princess-abbesses and then notes that two other abbesses, Kaya Rishun (d. 1576) and Gekkyōken were also buried there.¹¹ (Rishun is the abbess who preceded Gekkyōken and likewise was not a princess, but from the noble Konoe family.) Based on this record, I believe that the two unmarked graves (Figure 5) in the above-mentioned compound at Shinnyoji are those of the two non-princess abbesses. Neither the present-day chief priest of Shinnyoji nor the abbess of Hōkyōji was aware of this document or the identities of the occupants of the two graves. Because of weathering of the stone surfaces, the names are almost invisible, but after getting permission to make rubbings of the inscriptions on the gravestones in October 2012, I was able to confirm the death dates of Kaya Rishun on one of them (left)

⁸ *Kakumeiki*, vol. 4, p. 701.

⁹ For further information on this practice, see Gerhart 2009, p. 155 and Phillips 2003.

¹⁰ *Shinnyoji kōkatsuchō; Jūmotsu torishirabe sho* (1878); *Shaji jūmotsu torishirabe sho* (1884); *Hōmotsu jūki meisaichō* (1911).

¹¹ The record has no title or date. The copy at the Kyoto City Library of Historical Documents 京都市歴史資料館 is identified with the document number #7685.

and based on the above-mentioned record made when the engraved inscriptions were still legible, I presume that the other grave (right) must be that of Gekkyōken.

One reason for the present-day obscurity of these two non-imperial abbesses, and perhaps at some point intentional shifting of *ibai* at Shinnyoji, is that at the beginning of the Meiji period, in an effort to



Figure 5. Graves of Kaya Rishun and Gekkyōken. Shinnyoji.

bolster their imperial status, many convents removed the names of non-princess abbesses from their official lineage documents. By emphasizing their imperial heritage, their intention was to convince officials to allow them to function as cultural, not simply Buddhist institutions, which the new government was trying to marginalize. I had a long conversation about this with the current abbess of Hōkyōji who did not realize that this kind of “editing” had occurred. Following what she was taught by the former, now deceased abbess, she only chants sutras on behalf of and makes flower and incense offerings at the graves of the princess-abbesses. When I pointed out this problem to the abbess at another one of the remaining imperial convents,¹² she decided to write out a new lineage document in which she re-inserted the non-imperial abbesses who had been dropped in the Meiji period.

Third Portrait Statue: Abbess Kōtokuin

Returning to the images at Shinnyoji, the third abbess to be memorialized in sculpture there was Kōtokuin 高德院 (Richū 理忠, 1641–89) (Figure 6). She was also a daughter of Emperor Gomizuno-o and was born to the same mother as her older sister Senjuin.¹³ Kōtokuin entered Hōkyōji after her sister’s death in 1656 and was tonsured in that same year at the age of sixteen. She served as abbess for more than three decades until her death in 1689. An examination of her portrait sculpture by the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division in 1978, during which the detachable head was removed, revealed an inscrip-



Figure 6. Portrait sculpture of Kōtokuin (Richū). Shinnyoji.

¹² Kōshōin 光照院 imperial convent, Kyoto.

¹³ Hōshunmon’in 逢春門院 (1604–85).

tion on the interior dated Genroku 元禄 3 (1690). This is the year following Abbess Kōtokuin's death, so it was presumably made on the occasion of her first death anniversary. The scholars who did the initial survey also noted that there were what appeared to be ashes wrapped in paper placed inside the image. There is a long tradition in Asia of depositing hair, fingernails, and ashes (referred to as relics) in Buddhist images and portrait sculptures of clergy. Enshrining bodily relics in sculptures was a way of investing images with the spirit of the deceased, so they were more than just symbolic portraits.¹⁴ A second examination of the Kōtokuin sculpture was carried out in September 2012 and photographs taken with a camera inserted into the interior revealed a rosary which had been deposited inside the statue.¹⁵

The sculpture of Abbess Kōtokuin is nearly lifesize, like her sister Senjuin, with a height of 65 cm. She is represented with hands in the same meditational posture as the previous image of Abbess Gekkyōken. The elongated shape of Kōtokuin's head and distinctive facial features suggest that sculptors did strive to capture some characteristic or likeness of their subjects. This is obviously related to the sculptures' function, i.e. such portraits served not only as reminders, but substitutes for the deceased in memorial rituals. The artisans were probably shown actual robes and surplices for reference so that textile patterns and designs would be authentic. The surplice that Abbess Kōtokuin wears has the same pattern as the one worn by Senjuin, suggesting that it was in fact used by both sisters at Hōkyōji.

Fourth Portrait Statue: Abbess Honkakuin

The last portrait sculpture to be installed at Shinnyoji is that of Abbess Honkakuin 本覚院 (Tokugon Rihō 徳巖理豊, 1672–1745) (Figure 7). The daughter of Emperor Gosai and his wife Higashi Sanjō no Tsubone 東三条局 (d. 1695), she entered the convent as a novice at the age of twelve (1683) and was tonsured later that year. She was tutored by her abbess-aunt Kōtokuin and succeeded as head of the convent following her death. Honkakuin continued her religious studies well into her forties, receiving instruction from two Ōbaku priests.¹⁶ During her long reign as abbess (four decades) she helped to restore and rebuild many buildings at Hōkyōji as well as at Shin-



Figure 7. Portrait sculpture of Honkakuin (Rihō). Shinnyoji.

¹⁴ For further information on portrait sculptures with bodily relics, see Faure 1991, pp. 169–78; Foulk and Sharf 1993/1994; and Sharf 1992.

¹⁵ The examination was done by scholars from the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division and the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and a restoration expert from the Bijutsuin conservation laboratory.

¹⁶ Daizui Dōki 大隨道機 (1652–1717) and his pupil Hyakusetsu Gen'yō 百拙元養 (1668–1749). Priest Daizui presented her with confirmation of spiritual awakening (*inkajo* 印可状) in 1711.

nyoji, leading her to be designated as the convent's "restorer" (*chūkō* 中興). She was especially focused on reviving the legacy of Abbess Mugai Nyodai, and keen to publicly identify the convent and herself as part of Nyodai's lineage. In addition to compiling a biography of Mugai Nyodai,¹⁷ Honkakuin constructed a special chapel within the Dharma hall at Shinnyoji to house the portrait sculpture of Nyodai (Figure 8)¹⁸ and had a summary of Nyodai's accomplishments engraved on a plaque which she hung on the adjoining wall. Her efforts to distinguish the convent and herself as part of Nyodai's lineage did not go unnoticed: both of Abbess Honkakuin's Ōbaku mentors wrote verses in which they compared her to Mugai Nyodai.¹⁹



Figure 8. Portrait sculpture of Mugai Nyodai. Shinnyoji.

I assume that the portrait sculpture of Honkakuin was not made until some years after her death (in 1745) since it does not appear in the inventory of objects at Shinnyoji prepared in the late eighteenth century.²⁰ At present, the wooden image (approximately 43.5 cm high), like the others, is too fragile to move in order to examine the interior, so more precise dating will have to wait until it can be restored. I believe that the sculpture is based on a self-portrait painted by Honkakuin and self inscribed in 1713 that is in the collection of Hōkyōji,²¹ except that her hands are in the posture of Zen meditation rather than holding a ceremonial whisk. In both sculpted and painted portraits, Abbess Honkakuin is dressed in a purple robe decorated with the imperial chrysanthemum pattern, and carries the same surplice.

The four abbess statues were not always in the chapel space in which they now reside (Figure 9). I believe that this niche was added along the eastern wall of the Dharma hall sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century, perhaps when it was decided to create a statue in Honkakuin's memory to add to the previous three. From the outside of the hall one can clearly see the one-bay deep extension projecting from what was initially a square building (Figure 10). It is unclear where the first three sculptures were placed in the seventeenth century. An inventory of the objects at Shinnyoji datable to the eighteenth century lists the images of Senjuin and Kōtokuin as

¹⁷ *Keiai kaisan shiju gan Shōmyaku Sōken Nyodai Oshō den* (Biography of Abbess Mugai Nyodai).

¹⁸ The date of this sculpture is uncertain; however, the *Rokuon nichiroku* 鹿苑日録 diary of successive chief priests at Rokuonji (Kinkakuji) records that the image was restored in 1627, suggesting that the image dates at least back to the sixteenth century and probably earlier. *Rokuon nichiroku*, vol. 5, p. 372. I am grateful to the chief priest Egami Shōdō of Shinnyoji for providing me with the reference to this document.

¹⁹ Preserved at Hōkyōji. For the text of the verses and further details, see Fister 2009, p. 291.

²⁰ *Shinnyoji kōkatsuchō*.

²¹ For an illustration, see *Amamonzeki: A Hidden Heritage: Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Convents* (Tokyo: The Sankei Shimbun, 2009), p. 72.

being in the Dharma hall while the sculpture of Gyokuzan (Gekkyōken) and the mortuary tablets for all three abbesses are listed as being located on the altar in the Abbot's quarters (*hōjō* 方丈).²² The *hōjō* is no longer extant; obviously at some point the image of Gekkyōken and mortuary tablets were transferred to the Dharma hall, perhaps at the time the extension for enshrining all four sculptures was completed. The extension may have been commissioned by Honkakuin's successor at Hōkyōji, Jōshōmyōin 浄照明院 (Richō/Rishū 理長/理秀, 1725–65). The present arrangement with the four abbesses lined up along one side of the hall recalls the rows of portrait sculptures of Ashikaga shoguns enshrined in the memorial chapel Reikōden 靈光殿 at nearby Tōjiin 等持院—the mortuary temple and burial ground for the Ashikaga shogunal family. Hōkyōji abbesses no doubt had seen the Tōjiin sculptures and perhaps thought this would be an effective way to visually celebrate the lineage of Hōkyōji and the link with Mugai Nyodai, whose statue is within the eyesight of the four portrait sculptures. The fact that the images of Hōkyōji abbesses were enshrined at Shinnyoji and not at Hōkyōji is significant, for it was at Shinnyoji that important ceremonies for the powerful Rinzaï monastery Shōkokuji were held.

After the installation of Abbess Honkakuin's statue, there was no space in the chapel area for further sculptures of this size. Presumably for this reason, the two princess-abbesses who succeeded her²³ are memorialized at Shinnyoji by painted, not sculptural portraits.



Figure 9. Niche with portrait sculptures of four Hōkyōji abbesses.



Figure 10. Photograph of extension to Dharma hall.

²² *Shinnyoji kōkatsuchō*.

²³ Jōshōmyōin and Sanmajiin.

Function and Significance of the Abbess Portrait Statuary at Shinnyoji

How were these images regarded, and how did they function in Shinnyoji's Dharma hall? While only three were commissioned as memorials, in some sense they all performed the role of negotiating the boundary between life and death. Emperor Gomizuno-o no doubt found solace in the portrait he commissioned of his deceased daughter Senjuin, which captured her eternally in the act of prayer. In preparation for her own death, Abbess Gekkyōken sought to build up merit by commissioning a proxy image of herself and performing rites and offerings before it. The third and fourth statues paid tribute to the decades of service of Abbesses Kōtokuin and Honkakuin. All of the images served as substitutes for the abbesses during memorial rituals.

From records preserved at Shinnyoji we know that ritual viewing and veneration took place on the occasions of death anniversaries and special memorial services. Shinnyoji was not open to the public and therefore the images were only seen by priests, nuns, and members of the imperial family. Hōkyōji abbesses regularly participated in memorial rites for the founder, Mugai Nyodai, as well as deceased abbesses. The daily record kept by Shinnyoji²⁴ reveals that nuns from Hōkyōji visited often to request prayers to be said on death anniversaries and to make arrangements for special memorial services, and in preparation for these rites, the convent frequently sent offerings of money as well as food items and incense.²⁵

During memorial services, priests and nuns stood on the central floor of the Dharma hall and chanted sutras, did prostrations, burned incense, and made offerings of tea or hot water in front of the images. For participating abbesses of Hōkyōji, ritual events at Shinnyoji also served as occasions to celebrate their spiritual link with Mugai Nyodai. The portrait sculptures were the visual and liturgical focal point of the rituals. Their three-dimensional forms endowed them with a human presence and they were regarded as embodying the abbesses' physical and spiritual essence. These rituals were carried out regularly until the Meiji period, when government intervention in Buddhist temple affairs disrupted traditions. Much to my surprise, the present-day abbess of Hōkyōji had never been inside the Dharma hall and was unaware of the portrait sculptures although she visits the graves of deceased princess-abbesses on their death anniversaries. I arranged for her to view the interior of the hall and the sculptures in January 2013.

²⁴ *Shinnyoji kiroku*.

²⁵ In preparation for special death anniversaries, donations were collected from a wide range of people and temples, and sometimes images and structures were restored. There are numerous documents at Shinnyoji that record the names of participants as well as the amount of their offerings.

Summary

In sum, because of disrupted traditions and forgotten names, for the past few decades these magnificent portrait sculptures have been sitting in obscurity, their wooden bodies developing cracks and their polychromed surfaces slowly disintegrating. With the help of a wide range of primary sources and documents, I have been able to confirm their identities and to piece together parts of the puzzle regarding the circumstances surrounding their creation, original placement, and functions. In July 2012 I visited the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division together with the chief priest of Shinnyoji and spoke with one of the Buddhist sculpture specialists about the four sculptural portraits' historical significance and the need for restoration. A restoration expert came to examine the statues in September 2012 and again in April 2013. I am working with the Medieval Japanese Studies Institute (Chūsei Nihon Kenkyū-jo) in Kyoto to seek funding for restoring the portrait sculptures and I believe that restoration will get underway in the next year or two, at which time I will be able to examine the statues more thoroughly and hopefully be able to uncover more of the missing pieces of the puzzle.

*I would like to extend my gratitude to Rev. Egami Shōdō 江上正道, chief priest of Shinnyoji for his generous cooperation and support of this research, and to Nakano Noriyuki 中野慎之 of the Kyoto Prefectural Cultural Properties Protection Division for providing me with research materials. Unless otherwise stated, the photographs are by the author.

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