Researching the Lives and Art of Imperial Buddhist Nuns in Japan

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My decision to focus my research on the art of Buddhist nuns and the artistic culture of Japan's imperial convents was born from the fact that I live and work in Japan. It would not be possible if I were living in the U.S. for a variety of reasons, which I will discuss below. The fact that I am a female foreign scholar has also unexpectedly and happily given me special access to some of these unique convent collections.

To begin with, I have been doing research on Edo-period Japanese women artists for nearly twenty years. My interest in this subject stems from my American academic background, where studies of Western women artists began to proliferate from the 1970s. I was surprised to discover the large number of women artists active in traditional Japan, and organized an exhibition that was held in 1988 at both the Spencer Museum of Art and the Honolulu Academy of Arts.[1] When I moved to Japan in 1991 and began to practice Zen, I gradually shifted the focus of my research to Buddhist nuns who created art, which brought together my deepening interest in Buddhism and art historical research. I started doing *zazen* and attending *sesshin* 摂心 at the Rinzai Zen monastery at Tōfukuji 東福寺 and since 1995 have been continuing to do morning *sanzen* 参禅 at one of the temples within the Myōshinji 妙心寺 complex. The opportunity to go to a Zen monastery on an everyday basis, and at certain times spend several days at a time, strengthened my understanding of Zen doctrine and practice as well as Buddhist beliefs and rituals. It also made me more aware of manners and protocol at temples, which has aided my researches at Buddhist institutions.

As a female practitioner, I began to wonder about the devotional activities of my Japanese predecessors and tried to locate works by and in-

[1] The title of the exhibition and catalogue is *Japanese Women Artists 1600-1900*.

formation about Edo-period Buddhist nuns whose names I had encountered, I was hoping to include some examples of their work in a book on Edo-period Japanese women painters that I was writing for the Kyoto publisher Shibunkaku Shuppan, called *Kinsei no josei gakatachi: Bijutsu to jendā* 近世の女性画家たち：美術とジェンダー(1994). Two of the nuns I was interested in had been abbesses of imperial convents: Shōzan Gen'yō 照山元瑶 of Rinkyūji 林丘寺 in Kyoto and Daitsū Bunchi 大通文智 at Enshōji 圓照寺 in Nara. My efforts to gain entrance to Rinkyūji imperial convent, located on the grounds of Shūgakuin imperial villa 修学院離宮, failed. When I first ran across a reference to Abbess Gen'yō, not knowing that Rinkyūji was closed to the public, I naively hopped on my bicycle and peddled there—about a twenty-minute ride from my house. Of course I was refused entrance. None of the remaining imperial convents are open to the public domain. I later wrote a letter on Nichibunken stationary explaining my research interests and asking permission to visit, but it went unanswered. My initial letter requesting to visit Enshōji imperial convent in Nara was likewise ignored, but through a formal letter of introduction by a Buddhist priest friend, a visit was arranged in 1993. At first I met with rather cool reception at Enshōji, but once they saw that I had seriously researched the founder and had made copious notes in a book published by Enshōji fifty years ago, which I had obtained through interlibrary loan, copied, and brought with me for reference, the mood changed to one that was more warm and welcoming. I was allowed to study and photograph the Kannon painting by Abbess Bunchi that I had requested to see, received permission to include it in my book, and was given a copy of the book I had so laboriously xeroxed and studied.[2]

Just at this juncture, in 1993, I was introduced to Professor Barbara Ruch of Columbia University by Fukushima Keidō Rōshi 福島慶道老師, abbot of Tōfukuji monastery. She had come to the monastery with a group of scholars who were participating in a survey of documents at Hōkyōji 宝鏡寺 imperial convent, and I joined them for lunch. Three years later, I was invited by Professor Ruch to participate in the "Culture of Convents in Japanese History Conference" held at Columbia Univer-

[2] Suenaga and Nishibori 1955.

sity (1998), where I presented a paper on the artistic activities of two abbesses, Shōzan Gen'yō and Daitsū Bunchi. That was my first opportunity to meet Professor Manabe Shunshō 真鍋俊照, who, as one of the key figures in Professor Ruch's Imperial Buddhist Convent Survey Project, was a discussant for my panel. He and Professor Ruch invited me to join in their researches of art at the imperial convents. Professor Manabe has been an important mentor to me in Japan and I am honored that he agreed to take time out of his busy schedule and serve as a commentator today.

The New York conference was attended by a group of nuns from imperial convents, including the abbess of Rinkyūji, whom I was eager to meet in the hopes of gaining entrance. Plans to meet her during the conference did not materialize because of the nuns' busy schedule, but I received word that I should write to her upon returning to Kyoto, which I did, and I was invited to visit shortly thereafter. I find it ironic that it was through the introduction of a foreign scholar, i.e., Barbara Ruch, that I was finally able to visit this imperial convent and others. Attempts via my association with the Monbusho affiliated International Research Center for Japanese Studies and introductions from Japanese publishers with purported connections had gotten me nowhere.

Professor Ruch has made the comment that nuns and scholars are like oil and water: they can seemingly mix together for awhile, but ultimately they do not blend and separate. She related how the abbesses had closed their doors to scholars because they were distrustful as a result of past bad experiences. Having slowly gained their respect and trust, Professor Ruch is largely responsible for opening the doors to this new area of scholarship. The thirteen imperial convents which survive are literally treasure troves of documents and artifacts (ranging in date from the seventh to twentieth century) that have hitherto been little studied.

Here might be an appropriate time to comment on approaches. In the case of the imperial convents, it seems that the foreign women scholars working in this area, i.e., Barbara Ruch, myself, Monica Bethe, Katja Triplett, and Lori Meeks, have a somewhat better track record than Japanese scholars, who have often been denied access. Among the exceptions are two scholars participating in today's symposium: Professor Manabe, who as a Buddhist priest himself is sensitive to the situation of the impe-

rial convents, and Yamakawa Aki 山川暁, whose softspoken, courteous manner coupled with her vast knowledge of textiles have impressed the abbesses. I have learned a lot from observing Barbara Ruch, who as I mentioned earlier, has gained the trust and respect of all of the convents. She treats the abbesses and their historical predecessors with extraordinary respect and admiration—respect that is heartfelt and not simply a form of politeness. In addition, to put it simply, her approach is "give and take." Most scholars, when they visit temples, conduct their research, i.e., "take," and later use their findings in presentations or publications. The nuns at several imperial convents have complained to me about some Japanese researchers who had conducted surveys in the past. The convents had expended a great amount of time and effort accommodating the scholars and afterwards heard nothing, thus they were left feeling that they and their collections were being used to further someone's private agenda. Furthermore, at times during the surveys, they were treated in a rather perfunctory manner. Most of the nuns are eager to learn more about the works preserved in their institutions, and they are also nervous about the safety of their collections as the contents are made public. In addition to acknowledging their concerns, Professor Ruch's approach, which I have tried to follow, is to give the convents a set of photos and information gathered during research sessions. We also assure the convents that they will be asked for permission before anything which has been photographed is published. In addition, I have occasionally provided readings in modern Japanese for the documents I was shown, and have given the abbesses copies of other materials I find related to their convent's history and/or collection. As a result, I find that they are generally happy to have me return and conduct further research.

Another important aspect of doing research at imperial convents is to recognize that they are different from museums, libraries, or secular private collections; convents are living religious institutions. When making a visit, in addition to the requisite gift of cake or sweets, it is sometimes appropriate to make a small offering of money for the altar. I have also asked to pay respects to the deceased abbess whom I was studying by making a grave visit and offering flowers. These are all ways to show that one is mindful of imperial convent traditions.

Professor Ruch has gone even a step further in terms of giving, for

since 2002 she has been soliciting funds internationally for the restoration of imperial convent treasures and buildings, and through her efforts and grants from the Foundation for Cultural Heritage 文化財保護振興財団 in Tokyo and the World Monuments Fund of New York, artifacts and architectural structures at the convents are gradually being restored. Thus, instead of feeling "used" as the objects of scholars' studies, the imperial convents are benefiting from contact with us and our researches. As a measure of gratitude, Daishōji 大聖寺 imperial convent has generously made available the priory of one of its branch temple buildings on Teramachi street in Kyoto for the office of the Center for the Study of Women, Buddhism, and Cultural History 女性仏教文化史研究センター founded by Professor Ruch.

Another condition of doing research on the art of imperial Buddhist nuns is that it has to proceed slowly and at the pace of the various convents. In other words, this is not an area that can be researched in depth by someone who lives outside of Japan and makes occasional short visits. The nuns (usually there is only one or two in residence) tend to have rather busy schedules, and they are not ready to give free access to their storehouses. One has to be content with making an appointment every few weeks or months, and asking to see just a few things. Slowly and surely, the pieces of the puzzle begin to come together. I feel that I have been successful because I do not push to see too many things on one visit, and I am flexible and sympathetic to the nuns' concerns and schedules. Instead of asking for a special showing, for example, I might try to arrange a visit when a painting is hung for an annual ceremony. Having listened to the nuns' complaints about other scholars, I have tried to develop a mutually compatible research strategy. The fact that I live and work in Kyoto makes them feel a little more at ease, as they know I am not just going to disappear after taking notes and photographing works in their collections. A foreign scholar making short visits would have difficulty obtaining the same level of trust. They would also be frustrated at the snail's pace with which research seems to proceed. I find that foreign scholars living in Japan often are more slow and methodical in their researches, not publishing with the same frenzy due to pressure from their academic institutions like some of my colleagues in the West.

Imperial convents are unique worlds, as foreign to most contempo-

rary Japanese as they are to Westerners. Each abbess has a different personality, which determines the atmosphere of the convent and affects research conditions. Getting along well with the nuns at each convent is a prerequisite for conducting research. Sometimes this means listening to their complaints and problems and not getting to see the works one intended on a specific research visit. I have found that one needs to be a human being first and researcher second in one's dealings with the imperial convents.

As to what aspect of my approach has been defined by living in Japan, I feel that I am not in a rush to see everything, nor make quick analyses about what I see. It is not an option to be shown everything in an imperial convent's collection, so I am content with getting the pieces of the puzzle, one by one, sometimes even a year at a time. People often ask if I plan to write a book on this subject. That is definitely something I would like to do in the future, but to do it now would be premature, since I have only seen the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. In the meantime, as the pieces of the puzzle are revealed, I focus instead on writing articles on single objects, or a recurring theme. In comparison, I see colleagues in the West making analyses and developing theories about the "big picture" with comparatively only a few pieces of the puzzle securely in hand. While intellectually engaging, I believe that this scholarship may not be accurate in the long run.

One point which all of us here today are acutely aware of is that there is so much more available when you live in Japan in terms of artworks and primary research materials, as well as scholarship by contemporary Japanese colleagues which may not yet be in print, but that one learns about through private contacts. There is moreover a constant parade of exhibitions presenting opportunities to view well known as well as unpublished objects. Often there are no catalogues, so there is no way to know of the existence of the work without having seen it.

To give an example, two years ago I wrote an article on Merofu Kannon 馬郎婦観音 that was published last fall in a festschrift honoring Professor Manabe.[3] At the time of the writing, I was aware of four *oshie* 押絵 depictions of Merofu Kannon, all enshrined in *zushi* 厨子 at Rinzai

[3] Fister 2005.

Zen temples and imperial convents: three are by (or attributed to) Empress Tōfukumon'in 東福門院 and one is by the founder of Rinkyūji, Abbess Gen'yō. Only one of these *oshie* had been published; the others I saw in the course of my researches. In December of 2005, at a special opening of the temple Jissōin 実相院 in Iwakura 岩倉, I saw yet another version by Empress Tōfukumon'in. The temple did not know this image was a manifestation of Kannon, for it was labeled as Sanmi no Tsubone 三位局.[4] With this new piece of the puzzle, I was pleased to have further evidence of my speculation in the article concerning the popularity of this deity at court, especially in Tōfukumon'in's circle. In sum, the puzzle pieces of the research I am engaged in are more likely to be found in Kyoto temples rather than libraries. I have discovered that serendipity is an important aspect of research here. No matter how methodically you try to research something, chance comes into play. I was informed of the Merofu on view at Jissōin by a friend living in Iwakura, who happened to be reading my article just at the time she went to the special opening, and recognized the image as similar to the others I had published.[5]

Trying to get to all of the special temple openings and exhibitions, and process all of the information that is available, is a daunting task, but I generally feel that having seen a larger number of the "puzzle pieces," the research results of foreign art historians living in Japan give more precise and more complete pictures of their topics. Let me give a couple of examples. One of the princess-nuns I have done quite a bit of work on, the founder of Rinkyūji, Gen'yō, made hundreds, perhaps thousands of small Shō Kannon 聖観音 statues from powdered *shikimi* 樒 leaves (Figure 1).[6] In records they are commonly referred to as Makkō Kannon images 抹香観音像, Kannon incense images 観音香像, or *Shikimi*-leaf Kannon images 樒葉観音像.

According to records describing the creation of the images, which include inscriptions on the *zushi* enshrining the Kannon and others re-

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[4] See Fister 2007 for further information on this identity problem.

[5] I would like to thank Elizabeth Kenney for informing me of this special opening.

[6] For further information on Gen'yō's production of these images, see Fister 2003.

Fig. 1. *Shō Kannon* by Shōzan Gen'yō. Powdered *shikimi* leaves, incense, lacquer, and *niwaka* glue. Rinkyūji Imperial Convent, Kyoto.

corded in the *goroku* 語録 of related Buddhist priests, first Abbess Gen'yō collected leaves from *shikimi* trees, the branches of which are traditionally placed in front of Buddhist images or graves as offerings in Japan. Dried *shikimi* bark and leaves were also used to make incense; in the past, it was often mixed with other incense materials to make what is known as *makkō* 抹香, which is used in Buddhist ceremonies, hence the appellation Makkō Kannon. After collecting and washing the *shikimi* leaves, Gen'yō wrote the name of Kannon or sutra characters on each leaf. When the basket became full, she, or possibly one of her servants, ground the leaves into a powder. She added to this other kinds of incense, mixed it together with lacquer and *nikawa* 膠, and then pressed the mixture into a mold to create small Kannon images. At first glance, these images look as though they are made of wood, but upon close examination, one can see there are no traces of wood grain. Since they are made from a mold, they are identical in form. When researching this topic, I went to visit Hata Masataka 畑正高, the president of Shōeidō 松榮堂, one of the major incense shops in Kyoto long patronized by the imperial convents. He was quickly able to answer many of my questions about *makkō* and *shikimi* incense—one of the great advantages of living in Kyoto.

Abbess Gen'yō is recorded as making more than three thousand of these *shikimi*-leaf Kannon images after the death of her father, Emperor Gomizuno-o. Accounts unanimously relate that Abbess Gen'yō gave them away to believers, ranging from daimyo and palace attendants to clergy and temple parishioners of commoner status. To date I have personally seen eleven; four at Rinkyūji imperial convent and seven in Shi-

ga prefecture. In 2001 I and the chief priest of two Ōbaku 黄檗 temples in Shiga prefecture, Jianji 地安寺 and Shōmyōji 正明寺, the former founded by Abbess Gen'yō and the latter patronized by her, searched the altars in the various buildings for Gen'yō's Kannon images. I had a feeling some might turn up, since the temples own many paintings and sutras donated by her. We went from room to room, climbing onto the *butsudan* 仏壇 and opening every small *zushi*. As a result, we found four Kannon images identical to those at Rinkyūji. Ordinarily crawling around on the altar is not something one is permitted to do, but the chief priest Abe Ryōkai 安部梁解 was very open-minded and sympathetic to my research. He actually became quite excited about our discoveries, and on a later trip he also took me to the homes of some local parishioners where he had found images by Abbess Gen'yō enshrined on family altars while doing home visits during the Obon season. The parishioners, interestingly enough, had no idea they were by Gen'yō, as there were no labels attached to the images. They have quietly resided in those family altars for three centuries, the creator and the circumstances through which they were received, apparently unrecorded and until now, forgotten. This is still an ongoing search, and I must confess I always scan the altars of every temple I visit. But since the doors of most of the *zushi* are closed, this research is proceeding at a slow pace.

As I mentioned earlier, numerous unpublished documents, including inscriptions on the *zushi* enshrining some of the Kannon images at Rinkyūji, clearly record the process used by Gen'yō in creating these statues, presumably because it was unusual. Yet the entry in the catalogue of a small exhibition of treasures from imperial convents held in New York in 1998 described the images as "carved from the charred remains of *goma*—fragrant wood burned in esoteric Buddhist rituals for purification or exorcism."[7] Moreover, the entry continues, "These miniature icons were apparently for her own use, so they remain in the storehouse at Rinkyūji, and have rarely been seen outside the convent walls." [8]

Of course both of these statements are mistaken. This is a classic case of not thoroughly examining the works, including *zushi*, back and

[7] Graybill 1998, p. 22

[8] Ibid.

front, and other related records. The catalogue entry may possibly have been written merely from looking at a photograph. It also shows how easy it is to jump to conclusions, i.e., seeing several images at Rinkyūji during one research trip and making judgments about them.

Another Western scholar published two Kannon paintings as being by Abbess Gen'yō, after they were introduced in a Japanese exhibition years ago.[9] When I asked the abbess of Rinkyūji imperial convent, which owns these paintings, to see them, I was told that they are not by Gen'yō but later copies. Now that I have seen a large number of her paintings, I could make the same judgment myself from looking at the photographs. The American scholar who published them assumed, without ever examining them in person, that they were by Gen'yō, on the basis of the erroneous identification in the previous exhibition catalogue. Living in Japan, one has the luxury of checking things out more thoroughly before writing about them and publishing them, and not making hasty judgments. Not that I don't make mistakes—I do—but perhaps fewer of this kind. Moreover, I find I pay more attention to written documentation of a variety of forms.

For researching some areas of Japanese art, it may not be so crucial to live in Japan. But my area is one for which it is imperative. Not only do I have the privilege of visiting imperial convents on a regular basis, and thus opportunities to see a wider range of objects, but also I have the means to discuss the objects and texts I see with specialists. I have especially benefited from the comments of Professor Manabe during some of our surveys at the convents, and I have on numerous occasions sought the help of Professors Hayakawa Monta of Nichibunken and Norman Waddell of Ōtani University for deciphering difficult *kanbun* texts, for which I am most grateful. For enigmatic Zen phrases or texts, I have often gone to ask a Zen master, who is likely to be more knowledgeable than a Zen scholar.

My ideas about the function of Buddhist images and artifacts, and the motivation behind their creation, has broadened through seeing things in context over a long period of time. I have come to think of Buddhist images and artifacts less as "art objects" and see them more as

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[9] Asahi Shinbun Nagoya Honsha Kikaku-bu 1986, pp. 113-114.

sacred icons and ritual implements. That is the view of the majority of temple priests and nuns with whom I have talked. I have also become acutely aware of the importance of relics in Buddhist worship throughout the centuries. This is a topic that is just beginning to be explored in the West. References to relics abound in Buddhist literature, and I have come across examples of interesting relics in the imperial convents such as the *myōgō* 名号 (Figure 2) made by the abbess of Enshōji, Bunchi, with fingernail clippings collected from her father, Emperor Gomizuno-o.[10] I had seen small black-and-white pictures of these in a book published by Enshōji, but when making an appointment to see them and some other objects, I was first told, "We can't show you those—they are Emperor Gomizuno-o's fingernails; their condition is very delicate, and they are not fit to be seen by human eyes." I replied, "Wakarimashita" (I understand), but then when I went to the convent, the person in charge had taken them out of storage and showed them to me without any fuss. There is another fingernail *myōgō* by Abbess Bunchi enshrined in the Founder's Hall at Myōshinji (Figure 3), which I was also able to see through the auspices of my Zen teacher, Matsuyama Kankei 松山寛恵, formerly abbot of Myōshinji. However, the *myōgō* was not removed from the reliquary for closer viewing, although I was allowed to peer at it briefly through the wire mesh screen using a flashlight. Since relics are usually enshrined and not visible, they

Fig. 2. *Myōgō* created from Emperor Gomizuno-o's Fingernail Clippings by Daitsū Bunchi. Enshōji Imperial Convent, Nara.

[10] See Fister 2000.

Fig. 3. *Myōgō* created from Emperor Gomizuno-o's Fingernail Clippings by Daitsū Bunchi. Myōshinji, Kyoto. Photo from Suenaga and Nishibori.

are very difficult to research. As a result, I have not been able to confirm if fingernail *myōgō* made by other people exist, or whether this was an invention of Abbess Bunchi. There may well be other examples hidden away in *zushi* on temple altars.

In the past, I had not paid too much attention to what was on Buddhist altars, other than the main images. But thanks to frequent trips to temples and convents, and opportunities to crawl around on them as I described earlier, my knowledge in this area is increasing. Until last year, I was completely ignorant about *uchishiki* 打敷 —altar cloths made from kimono—until I had the opportunity to observe Monica Bethe and Yamakawa Aki examine, or maybe I should say cross-examine, some of these beautiful textiles at one of the imperial convents. This is another area that could not be studied extensively by scholars not living in Japan.

With regard to learning from and refining one's ideas by seeing things in context, having watched Buddhist priests do calligraphy, and having heard them talk about their motivation—usually requests from parishioners—I know that it is not just a matter of spontaneously putting brush to paper and expressing their "enlightenment" as is often reiterated in Western texts on Zen art. So when I look at a piece of calligraphy, in addition to trying to determine the meaning of its content, I think about what event or request might have prompted its creation, for whom was it done, etc. as opposed to looking at it primarily as a visual work of art, or

traces of someone's spiritual understanding, as I might have done twenty years ago. Moreover, through living in Japan and associating with a variety of Buddhist clergy on a regular basis, I have overcome the idealized and misinformed image I once had of the lifestyle and mental state of priests and nuns put forth in West. They are just regular people, with varying degrees of practice and understanding of the Buddhist doctrine.

Are there advantages of being a non-Japanese researcher? I would have to answer yes and no. I tend to speak more openly and directly than many Japanese, which often encourages a similar response. The nuns, who have had some bad experiences with scholars in the past, appreciate my honesty and directness. They also sense the sincerity of my interest in learning about and understanding their art and culture. Old Buddhist artifacts are not a hot topic of interest in Japan these days, where young people have their eyes focused on the West. Whereas a Japanese scholar might be more reserved, I have no qualms about climbing around on an altar if permitted. Having been raised in America, I do not have the same preconceived ideas or sense of taboo as a Japanese, and perhaps can look at things more freshly. I find when I am with other Japanese scholars, I am more reserved, but on my own I am likely to be more outgoing and candid, which is usually a plus.

As for disadvantages, I am still frustrated at times about language problems—not understanding everything I hear, or not being able to read things quickly or readily decipher old documents. This is something that I am still working on—mastering the language is a lifelong process. I know that I will never acquire the level of skill of some of my Japanese colleagues, who have received special training in this area.

There is enough material in the imperial convents to keep me busy as a researcher for my entire lifetime. How much I can accomplish, I don't know. But I feel I am in a unique position, as I have access to this material and very little work has been done. Sometimes I feel frustrated when I am tied up with work at Nichibunken and cannot make time for research, and I think, someone else could do this task, but who is going to do the research on imperial convent art? I look forward to having more scholars join in our efforts to decipher the stories imbedded in images and artifacts, and to piece together the history of art connected with religious women in Japan.

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