

# 15

## Unheeded Voices; Winked-at Lives

BARBARA RUCH

INTRODUCTION

In re-examining Japanese cultural history, how are we to deal with 'absence'?<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade it has become increasingly clear that pre-modern history in Japan, not unlike Japanese court poetry, has been written from a now canonized list of pre-selected, privileged topics. Not only traditional predilections favoured over the centuries, but modern arthritic habits of scholarly attention and an academic vocabulary frozen by class, gender and status preclusion have led to a preference for certain topics of research, and a denigration of other features. For example, the professions and activities pursued exclusively by men, such as the Gozan institution of Zen monks or *sarugaku* Noh performers and repertory occupy a privileged place in Japanese history, whereas those professions and activities pursued exclusively by women, such as the Gozan institution of Zen convents run by ecclesiastical women, or the *kugutsu* and *asobime* sororities of *imayō* performers have been systematically excluded from standard and official histories. As women, therefore, major cultural leaders and prominent creative talents have been wholly ignored in the pages of our histories. Such institutionalized bias in our profession skews methodology and calls into question current interpretations of Japanese cultural, literary and religious history.

Within the constraints of these few pages let me introduce just one major cultural leader who was a woman and one female creative talent, both of whom have remained unheeded, indeed have been treated with virtual programmatic neglect. Restoration of these persons to their proper place in history should help us to 're-think Japan.' May their lives and activities stand as examples of some of the directions we must take here [at the Venice Symposium] as we attempt to re-examine Japanese history and our own obligations as scholars.

MUGAI NYODAI

Scholars of art history for years have done careful and interesting research on the Japanese sculpture genre known as *chinsō*, those large realistic

wooden or clay portrait-sculptures of Zen priests made as stand-ins to convey the essence of the master to his disciples after his death. One day, leafing through a book filled with photographs of *chinsō*,<sup>2</sup> all of them depicting illustrious Zen masters dressed in Buddhist robes and with shaved heads, I was astonished to find one that proved to be the figure of a thirteenth-century female Zen master. I was riveted by this statue-portrait, the first I had ever seen of a medieval Japanese abbess. Intrigued by what I then naïvely considered an anomaly in Japanese religious history, I pursued her story.

It turned out that her religious name was Mugai Nyodai and she lived 1223-1298. The intimate realism of her superb statue-portrait reveals a serious woman in her seventies with life-worn face and meditative posture whose glimmering eyes of crystal emanate a sense of great power and life force. During the past decade this statue has been studied carefully and it has been designated an 'Important Cultural Property.' But neither the woman it depicts nor the important religious association of Zen convents she founded has received any serious academic attention whatsoever.

The simplest of my probes into the standard Japanese references on Buddhism or cultural history revealed at once our woeful state of current research on ecclesiastic women in Japan. Few sources mention Mugai Nyōdai at all and each that does perfunctorily assigns her a different father and husband. Some Japanese reference works are so blatantly casual as to attribute to her a husband who proves upon investigation to be thirty-five years her junior. One assigns her a father who was born eight years after she was and another twenty-five years after!<sup>3</sup>

Scholarly irresponsibility and neglect of this sort is due in no way to any failure on Mugai's part to be worthy of historians' attention nor to any lack of her social status or accomplishments. She was an extraordinary woman; most likely, in my view, if we study birth and death dates carefully, she was the daughter of Adachi no Kagemori, and she would appear to have been the first wife of Hōjō (Kanazawa) Sanetoki. Highly educated in both Chinese and Japanese she studied Zen in Kamakura under Mugaku Sogen (1226-1286) who had come from China in 1279 at the invitation of the regent Hōjō Tokimune to head the temple Kenchōji there. It was Mugaku Sogen who recognized Mugai Nyodai as heir to his teachings and gave her the character 'mu' from his own name. She became the first woman in Japan fully qualified as a Zen master and she became the founder and abbess of Keiaiji and its more than fifteen sub-temples in Kyoto. Mugai's Keiaiji headed the then-developing network of Zen convents known as the Niji (Amadera) Gozan or Five-Mountain Convents Association, a parallel institution to the well-known and well-studied Gozan monasteries for male priests. Shortly after her death the Five-Mountain Convents expanded beyond Keiaiji and its sub-temples to include Tsūgenji, Danrinji, Go'nenji, Erinji and their respective sub-temples as well as a parallel five convents in Kamakura: Taiheiji, Tōkeiji, Kokuonji, Gōhōji and Zemmyōji.

I am still amazed that after almost thirty years of professional study of Japanese literature and cultural history I had never been taught, nor had I heard or read a single word about this considerable female side to medieval

Zen, nor have I ever seen any references to this aspect of the lives of eminent medieval women. To this day I still have not found a single scholar anywhere who has researched and written on the Five-Mountain Convents, despite the fact that, without doubt, it was an extensive economic and political power in both Kamakura and Kyoto and is one of the most important manifestations of institutionalized Buddhism in medieval Japanese history.

I feel compelled to recount here, for the record, that when I recently questioned such an enormous gap in our concern for and knowledge about this aspect of medieval Japanese religion, a well-known and respected scholar in Japan told me that Japanese scholars (most of whom are male) 'are embarrassed (*hazukashii*) to do research on institutions that deal essentially with women.'

Given the dismal perception of the writing of Japanese religious history that Mugai Nyodai's case represents, it is heartening to keep in mind that, after centuries of neglect in the West concerning the history of women ecclesiastics in the Christian tradition, concerted scholarly efforts over the past decade have produced a rich harvest. The writings of numerous women theologians have been re-discovered and translated for the first time into modern languages. Histories of the Christian Church Fathers are now being balanced by soundly researched pages about the Mothers of the Early Church. The same can surely be the case for Japan. 'But there is probably no documentation to be found in Japan,' say the sceptics. To whom one must reply, 'Where are the research projects designed to survey Japanese Convents and seek out such documentation? It is a wide open field.'

This indeed is the time to integrate the study of medieval Japanese ecclesiastic women into a world context. Since 1982 a major computer-supported survey of European convents and religious communities of women from Italy to the British Isles has been under way; in due course, it is planned that years from 500-1500 will all be surveyed. The parallels with medieval Buddhist Japan are obvious and enlightening despite the theological differences in the faiths that motivated the women East and West. Reporting on this research project in the Catholic West, Mary McLaughlin outlines a situation that could as well describe medieval Japan in Mugai Nyodai's day.

Women associated with religious life... belonged to families at nearly every level of medieval society from royal and aristocratic to those of decidedly lower status in towns and countryside. By no means all of them were professed nuns; many communities also included... female servants and sometimes lay 'boarders'.... Further extending the social range of women associated with the religious life were houses of repentant prostitutes established in many late medieval towns and cities. Still another category... especially numerous in England, were those who abandoned the world or monastic communities for the solitary life of recluses and anchoresses.<sup>4</sup>

Several of Mugai's successors were tonsured empresses or members of the imperial family. At the same time, McLaughlin's narrative reminds us of the author of *Towazugatari*, Lady Nijō (1258-1305?) who, after taking

the tonsure and setting out on pilgrimages around the country, encounters several nuns who previously had made their living as prostitutes, one a former brothel owner.<sup>5</sup>

In the Muromachi period *monogatari* called *Shichinin bikuni* are depicted the lives of seven nuns. One is particularly illustrative of several of the life-styles of medieval Japanese nuns and yet is also remarkably similar to the description of cloistered nuns, mendicant nuns and solitary recluses in the McLaughlin report. *Shichinin bikuni* reads:

(She)... cut off her hair, and changed her flower-like appearance to that of a nun. In linen robes, carrying a mendicant's bag, her make-up gone, her natural complexion revealed, she wandered through the provinces as a tattered beggar.... She decided to go to Zenkōji. There was a sub-temple to one side, the abbot of which was greatly revered as someone who obtained enlightenment. She felt this was the kind of place she had been looking for and stayed in the area for two years. Sometimes she secluded herself in mountain valleys; sometimes she begged with other mendicants.<sup>6</sup>

There are even more striking parallels to be found between the Christian West and Buddhist Japan during the early years when these religions were first developing. Japanese women faced a situation with the importation of Buddhism that was very much like the plight of their Greek and Roman counterparts for whom Christianity was also an import. In both worlds a religion imported by men was growing and being domesticated in a religious environment of ritual and thought organized by males into male institutions, with only satellite places for women. The ascetical male writers of the Christian Church voiced themes that sound exactly as if they could as well be quoted from an orthodox Buddhist text: 'Virtue properly pertains to men, but through grace, women are also capable of being elevated to manhood.'<sup>7</sup>

Yet Mugai Nyodai was born at a moment in Japanese history, short-lived though it was, when radical new ideas were emerging. Dōgen had travelled to China the year Mugai Nyodai was born and introduced Sōtō Zen thought in Japan when she was just four years old. His treatise *Shōbōgenzō* was uncompromising in its assertion of the complete equality between the sexes in religious matters.

What is so sacred about the status of a man?... The four elements that make up the human body are the same for a man as for a woman.... You should not waste your time in futile discussions about the superiority of one sex over another.... Learning the Law of Buddha and achieving release from illusion have nothing to do with whether one happens to be a man or a woman.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Mugaku Sogen, founder of Rinzai Zen in Japan, named Mugai Nyodai as heir to his teachings is clear indication that he, too, believed that religious enlightenment was genderless.

Although in the pages of Japanese history Mugai Nyodai seems to appear out of nowhere and for the moment is alone on the horizon, we dare not treat her as an anomaly. An anomaly is harmless; it surprises and entertains us but it need not concern us in fundamental ways. Mugai, however,

shows us how fundamental our misconceptions have been. No understanding of medieval Zen, its values or practices or even medieval society itself begins to approach reality until it reflects Mugai's presence in it. On the other hand, if we simply categorize Mugai Nyodai as 'woman' or as 'nun' we will have merely substituted classification for meaning. Mugai Nyodai must stand not only for herself but for all the unstudied founder-abbesses of Japanese history. Indeed she also stands for all those women who took the tonsure and thereafter moved not only to the cloister but out into the world of commerce and the arts: merchant nuns, artist nuns too played a fundamental role in the creation of Japan's emerging national culture.

In the year 1498 Keiaiji burned to the ground. Mugai Nyodai's *chinsō* was rescued and removed to one of Keiaiji's sub-temples in Kyoto, the cloister Hōji-in, where it remains today,<sup>9</sup> a continuing power and presence in the lives of the nuns who live there. Nonetheless, for all of us, this 'Important Cultural Property' remains an important cultural challenge, a powerful reminder of that other side of gender, of those voices from the past we scholars have left unheeded for so many generations.

#### OTOMAE

Let me move on to another woman who took the tonsure in old age but who had led a life radically different from that of Mugai Nyodai - a woman as fated in her own day, maybe more so, than Mugai was in hers. Yet she too has been so overshadowed in history by her male associates that few Japanese today have even heard her name.

Otomae was a *kugutsu*<sup>10</sup> singer without peer in early twelfth-century Kyoto. Her repertory was the best the centuries had to offer of *imayō* songs, which by her day had become almost classical in form; and she was master of more than twenty variant types. Like the German *lied*, the Japanese *imayō* was a deeply-moving combination of words and music - a universal story told with deeply culture-bound nuance.

Already retired and known as 'the Gōjō Avenue nun,' Otomae was in her early seventies when Emperor GoShirakawa, then just entering his thirties, called her to court in 1157 and apprenticed himself to her so as to learn her repertory. That great collection of songs of past centuries, the *Ryōjin hishō* (Secret Selection of Songs that Make the Rafter-dust Dance), is traditionally thought of as Emperor GoShirakawa's work.<sup>11</sup> It was of course his passion for these songs that led him to study with Otomae, collect these songs in repertory, and commit them to writing to preserve them. It would perhaps be better, however, to refer to the *Ryōjin hishō* as Otomae's songs. As a *kugutsu* singer her professional lineage can actually be traced back, matrilineally, through at least three generations of female *imayō* masters: her own teacher and adopted mother was Mei,<sup>12</sup> who was the disciple of Shisan, who in turn had been the adopted daughter and disciple of the *imayō* master Nabiki.

From about age 12 Otomae had devoted her life to learning, performing, and no doubt adding to the repertory, and then teaching those songs. GoShirakawa was, we should not forget, her devoted student and amanuensis. In a very real sense he was her final disciple. Although Otomae

had a daughter to whom GoShirakawa refers several times in his anecdotal accounts about the *imayō* world, she is never named and is never mentioned as a singer or possible heir. She attends *imayō* gatherings and seems an astute listener and critic, but we must assume she lacked the vocal talent (or will) requisite for public performance.

GoShirakawa was a passionate enthusiast for the popular vocal music of his day as well as for the great body of songs that had by then become the favourite classics in the repertory of professional performers. GoShirakawa was a dedicated, even fanatical student. His own account of his practice sessions reveals a man who practised long hours daily without fail, often in all-night sessions to the annoyance of his neighbours who found the percussive beats of the accompanying hand-drum hardly conducive to sleep. He lost his voice numerous times from sheer vocal fatigue, so assiduous was his pursuit of mastery.

Determined to preserve these beloved songs and to assure their transmission for future generations just as *waka* poetry had been preserved in collections and adorned by interpretive treatises, GoShirakawa committed himself to learning Otomae's entire repertory. And so overwhelmed was he by Otomae's talent, even in her seventies, that he re-learned from her all the songs he had learned before from others, so as to reproduce faithfully her words and musical interpretations.

Some ten years later when Otomae was in her eighties and had fallen ill, GoShirakawa sat at her bedside and sang the thirty-second song from the collection which concerned Yakushi Nyorai, the Healing Buddha, a song whose power was believed to invoke a cure for the most serious of illnesses. Within months of her death he had taken the tonsure and by year-end completed all but the conclusion of the *Ryōjin hishō* collection he had been copying down for so long since Otomae first came into his household as mentor.

Historians transform life that has been lived into narrated life, and in this sense they are not unlike novelists. By selecting, focusing and retelling they inevitably reshape. By focusing on GoShirakawa, the aristocrat, the Emperor, scholars have been able to justify their study of the *Ryōjin hishō* collection of songs and to enjoy it. In the selective re-telling, however, Otomae, the source and the star, but after all the lowly, winked-at, *kugutsu* singer-entertainer, was deposited into the footnotes and now finally has been lost to national memory.

That was certainly not GoShirakawa's intent. His *Kudenshū* is filled with his admiration and awe of her, with his record of her critical remarks, with his dreams of this elderly nun after her death in which she returns from the next world and continues to teach him. He is straightforward: he has received the complete transmission of Otomae's art and has dedicated himself to preserving it for posterity.

But Otomae is not alone in her neglect. GoShirakawa was not merely a passionate disciple of the one he considered the best; he was a connoisseur of the best voices of his day. He mentions specifically by name more than twenty other professional *kugutsu* or *asobime* singers in the *Kudenshū*.

Needless to say the most accomplished and influential of female artists have not fared well in the pages of history. They have generally been swept

into the easily dismissable anonymous category of 'entertainer' or even 'prostitute,' and their names are subsumed and obscured under the glowing fame of their élite male patrons. The great *shirabyōshi* dancers such as Ishi and Kamegiku, for example, have been lost to the modern consciousness; no one recognizes their names. When Zeami wrote his famous treatises on Noh plays in the fifteenth century he put *shirabyōshi* dancers such as Iso no Zenji, Ishi, Kamegiku and Shizuka on the same level of artistic accomplishment as such Heian poetesses as Lady Ise and Ono no Komachi.<sup>13</sup>

But history is not written by great artists about other artists. Scholars, heavily influenced by Confucian thought, simply dropped these women from their list of appropriate subjects for research. The problem was not simply one of gender but of sex. Entertainers who also provided sex for a living, or those who did not, but who in the course of life had lovers and patrons, all seemed most easily classified as 'prostitutes.'

Japanese *kugutsu* and *asobime* singers and *shirabyōshi* dancers suggest many parallels with the professional hetaerae ('female companions') from fourth century B.C.E. Greece. They were skilled entertainers; lived fashionably alone or in small all-female groups; ranged in origin from slave to free professional; were patronized for their arts and conversation by wealthy men; were hired to perform at state and family events; and were taxed by the government. They may also be fruitfully compared to the religiously-sanctioned performer-prostitute of South India, the Devadasis, who go back also to the fourth century B.C.E.

GoShirakawa mentions several times employing *asobime* from Eguchi and Kanzaki as well as *kugutsu* from Aohaka and Sunomata in Mino to take part in the fifth-month Buddhist flower dedication ceremonies at court. Indeed at least one of GoShirakawa's long-time consorts and mother of one of his sons was Tamba no Tsubone, an *asobime* whose mother too had been an *asobime*.

Because women professionals such as shamans, *kugutsu* and *asobime* singer-entertainers and *shirabyōshi* dancers were each and all husband-less, independent, often living (and if itinerant, travelling) in small self-regulating groups and were matrilinear in lineage, mother to daughter or female adept to adopted daughter-disciple, observers throughout history have tended to see them all as of a kind and to expend little effort in determining the differences among these very different artists and their groups. Since none of these groups was maintained by the court or the Buddhist temples as had been male professionals like *bugaku* and *gagaku* troupes and *sarugaku* players, virtually every female entertainment artist in pre-modern Japanese life, therefore, was outside the institutional structure.

Due to gender bias the label 'prostitute' hangs heavily over the history of women entertainers, not only those who did engage in selling sex but all of these several types of husband-less, independent, medieval female artists (even those who were virginal and ascetic) in a way it does not hang over the lives of male artists who were, likewise, like Zeami, involved sexually with their patrons.

It is important to realize that we *have* no conceptual framework in which

to consider the historical activity of sex commerce. The modern term 'prostitution' is virtually useless. Leah Otis' recent study of prostitution in twelfth to sixteenth-century France makes it clear that 'it is not possible, in studying the history of prostitution, to rely... on the social sciences for a set of assumptions or constraints.'<sup>14</sup> As she points out, prostitution in the modern sociological literature is seen as 'deviant' behaviour, and therefore the investigator is invariably more interested in determining motive and recruitment than in establishing analytical models that might be useful to the historian. The profession as an urban phenomenon with its considerable commercial importance and complex tax structure has been largely ignored by economists, dismissed as a 'non-productive' activity.

From the highest ranking élite and powerful ecclesiastics like Mugai Nyodai to the greatest of performing artists in the capital like Otomae, and those who as yet remain nameless in our annals of history, all of these women were orthodox constituents of the medieval Japanese social order. Whether they have been winked at patronizingly or wholly ignored by early scholars who set the tradition, the fact is that they have been aborted from the pages of official history.

Theodore Bestor, in his commentary on a recent 'Workshop on Gender Issues' in the Study of Japan,' reports that as of the 1970s when gender studies as a field was in its infancy, the impact of such gender considerations on research about Japan was virtually nil.<sup>15</sup> Once gender studies gained momentum in American academia, however, a reverse phenomenon occurred: numerous studies suddenly emerged taking as their object of research topics that narrowly focused on women treated as phenomena separate from mainstream Japanese culture and society. In short, women were no longer absent from the research agenda, but they were segregated within it (i.e. studies of 'women politicians;' 'women poets;' etc.). Our goals must be the integration of knowledge about *all* the influential actors on the stage of history when we attempt to reconstruct the past.

Japan has not one past, but many pasts, all of which are indispensable to our knowledge of the whole. As we [at this Venice Symposium] attempt to 're-think Japan,' it is not enough merely to expand the limits of historical discourse - that is to say, merely to incorporate more of the actual world into our studies. When we include individuals and groups traditionally excluded from the historical and literary narrative we are incorporating new social territory as well. Old maps will not do.

New methodologies, new sources, new forms of presentation will be necessary. There is no way, for example, that we can write the history of ecclesiastic women simply by taking old histories of monks as models. Nor does current research on Zeami, for instance, provide a functional framework for the study of Otomae. Yet both the old and the new will be enriched by taking new approaches that incorporate all actors on the stage of history irrespective of gender. Therefore, as I urge here the recovery of lost histories of neglected groups I am not advocating further segmentation of scholarship. Rather I suggest that our search for the larger synthetic patterns in literary and cultural history will fail if half the lights are out.

# RETHINKING JAPAN

---

IN TWO VOLUMES



VOLUME I

Literature, Visual Arts  
& Linguistics

---

EDITED BY ADRIANA BOSCARO,  
FRANCO GATTI & MASSIMO RAVERI

**Japan Library Limited**  
Sandgate, Folkestone, Kent