Guardians of the Buddha's Home. By Jessica Starling. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. 200 pages. $62.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780824866921.

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In *Guardians of the Buddha's Home*, Jessica Starling decenters our view of modern Jōdo Shinshū practice by calling into question the primacy of "orthodox" roles, physical spaces, and relationships, often occupied and defined by male figures, that tend to undergird the tradition. Her book stands to contribute to the growing discourse in Buddhist and Japanese studies surrounding female identity in otherwise androcentric religious communities and offers a cogent and commanding example of how ethnography can enliven this discourse within fields otherwise dominated by textual studies.

Through her ethnographic approach to the multifarious roles of female Jōdo Shinshū "temple guardians" (*bōmori*) or temple caretakers, Starling reveals at least three registers of engaged religiosity among her subject pool: temple stewardship at the familial level, parishioner assistance at the social level, and doctrinal learning at the intellectual level. She demonstrates how these modes of religiosity form a confluence of professional and personal experience and demarcate the modern "position of the temple wife" (p. 3). The religious practice of *bōmori*, as her study suggests, emerges dynamically at the nexus between the social expectations, spatial parameters, and human relationships that constitute the modern Jōdo Shinshū tradition. The implications of her arguments are that (1) human, especially familial, relationships can serve as both a reflection of and model for one's relationship to their Buddhist tradition; and (2) doctrinal understanding can take many forms and emerge well beyond the boundaries of orthodox pedagogy.

Her use of the terms "domestic religion" (as part of the book's subtitle) and "domestic religious professional" (as an alternative description of *bōmori*) reflect both the book's main argument and purpose. She

uses "domestic" not as a reference to house-bound activities set apart from public enterprise, but rather as a reference to any action carried out in a mundane milieu. "Domestic religion," therefore, reflects the inability to extricate recognizably "sacred" activities from the "mundane," such as food preparation for patrons, temple upkeep, and the rearing of future *bōmori*, and constitutes "religion as it is practiced in an intimate, quotidian key, outside of formal liturgical or canonical contexts" (p. 15). These activities carry with them religious value and meaning despite their apparent distance from more orthodox modes of religious practice.

This dissolution of the conceptual boundaries between what constitutes "religious" and "non-religious" activities occurs similarly in Starling's treatment of what constitutes "professional" and "non-professional" activities. That is, she notes how the gender ideologies that often support labor divisions between men and women ironically create new professional roles for women. In an example that appears numerous times throughout the book, the departure of the usually-male resident priest (*jūshoku*) from the temple to perform in-home ceremonies or engage in supplemental work leaves *bōmori* to oversee all temple activities; she is "confined" to the temple-home and yet readily fills this vacant and authoritative role as overseer. In her attempt to decenter both the sacred and male-driven rubrics with which scholars often measure religious experience, Starling therefore identifies and leverages the mundane qualities inherent to "domesticity" and reveals a religious practice that operates below the elite levels of liturgical and doctrinal prowess and, likewise, beyond the gendered confines supported by social expectation. Starling frames her book by attending to the above issues in the introduction, which delineates the theoretical, methodological, and historical approaches to the role of family and gender in the modern Jōdo Shinshū tradition.

In chapter 1, "A Family of Clerics," Starling begins by drawing out a narrative of social conceptions surrounding *bōmori* through an interview with a male resident priest, Nagai Akira, of a mid-sized temple located in Kobe. While it may appear counterintuitive to begin a book meant to challenge androcentric views of religious practice with a male interviewee, Starling uses this as a framing device for the remaining chapters. Through Nagai Akira's words and sentiments, she identifies the social and religious tension surrounding gender equity within the network of family temple management. When pushed on the issue of

whether women can officially become resident priests, Akira explains that while sectarian bylaws and legislation could change for the sake of gender equity, the social and religious "realities" would remain the same (p. 25). This entrenchment of gender inequity among temple roles is maintained through temple literature and written instructions for fledgling priests and temple mothers, and thus creates "a childbearing narrative that envisages children as the beneficiaries of the gifts of the Buddha. Once the debt is recognized, the son (or daughter) will want to repay it by protecting the temple for another generation" (p. 32). Starling seizes upon this combinatory effect of, on the one hand, the social expectation of male-only stewardship of the temple and, on the other, the imperative of childrearing as a religious requital directed toward the Buddha. Through a series of interviews with female members of the Nagai family that follow in this chapter, Starling begins to raise implicit questions that pervade the rest of the book: What are the social and institutional forces at work that sustain critical views of both the role of *bōmori* and their potential role as priests, and how do *bōmori* reconcile those views with their own religious and social desires?

In chapter 2, "Staying at Home as Buddhist Propagation," Starling begins to confront this narrative laid out in chapter 1 by exposing the disjuncture between expectation and reality with regard to the religious lives of *bōmori*. While narratives of childrearing tend to dominate temple literature, and while this narrative is maintained in the minds of the community of parishioners, the day-to-day reality of *bōmori* reveals temple work as religiously ingrained in every minutia. Here, Starling invites readers to consider the "domestic" and "religious" arenas on equal terms, whereby *bōmori* engage and propagate the Jōdo Shinshū tradition among its community neither from in front of the altar nor from outside the temple. That is, in the life of a *bōmori*, religion is nestled among the seemingly mundane tasks within the temple-home. This co-constituency of domesticity and religiosity culminates with Starling's use of her phrase "propagation of hospitality," a form of intensified hospitality that emerges at the intersection between, on the one hand, a fervent spirituality and an imperative to push Jōdo Shinshū teachings out into the world and, on the other, the imperative to fulfill modern Japanese gender roles focused on the reception, caretaking, and comforting of visitors to the temple-home (p. 61). Starling shows that these duties to propagate the tradition and attend to the constant flow of parishioner demands creates opportunities to

forge meaningful spiritual connections within the community. More ultimately, *bōmori* contribute to strengthening—through consultation, advice-giving, and tea-sharing among the parishioner community—the spiritual ties that bind Jōdo Shinshū adherents to one another and enliven their sense of true faith (*shinjin*) in Amida Buddha.

Issues surrounding definitions of religiosity, work, and the parameters of female identity coalesce in chapter 3, "Home Economics: Stewardship of the Buddha's Goods." This chapter explores how "nontextual foci," or domestic labor surrounding parishioner donations, aid in our understanding of how a lay religious presence within a domestic setting forms the basis for a thriving religious community stewarded by the *bōmori* (p. 64). This chapter builds on points in the previous chapter in at least two ways. First, Starling describes how religious experience shared between the *bōmori* and the temple parishioners is more strongly grounded in their physicality within the temple space than in intellectual engagement with an otherwise intangible doctrine. Starling invites readers to bear witness to the forging of communal ties within the Jōdo Shinshū tradition by observing the parishioners' physical engagement, which takes the form of polishing religious implements within the boundaries of the temple. These actions, she claims, allow lay volunteers to gain "a sense of ownership and intimacy with the components of the usually off-limits inner altar" (p. 66). In this way, a *bōmori*'s engagement with laity works toward more than one end: parishioners foster a sense of communal and religious belonging within the temple, while the *bōmori* foster a more intimate relationship between herself and the parishioners.

Starling then devotes the latter half of the book to tracing the path of *bōmori* training and its broader social implications within the tradition. In Chapter 4, "Social Networks and Social Obligations in the Discipling of *Bōmori*," she begins by confronting how much of *bōmori* training is inscribed in embodied, mimetic practices in the day-to-day, which surround the broader, standardized framework of training established and maintained by the religious institution. These day-to-day practices, she says, emerge through and are sustained by mothers-in-law, local community networks, and family businesses, among other familial and social parties. While the chapter title suggests that "social obligations" drive much of the interactions that undergird foundational training for *bōmori*, Starling also keenly recognizes the influence of religious imperatives, such as karmic affinity, that many

bōmori also see at play in guiding their paths into a life of temple caretaking. This chapter, above all, underscores the tripartite influence of the Jōdo Shinshū institution, society and family, and religious outlooks that define not only the training and eventual service of *bōmori* at the temple, but the expectation of docility in female religious observance generally. "For *bōmori*," Starling claims, "this docility should be both filial and spiritual" (p. 106).

Chapter 5, "Wives in Front of the Altar," continues to engage the issue of public scrutiny by tracing how common parishioner expectations coincide with a largely gendered tradition. While common among *bōmori* are sentiments of unpreparedness or inadequacy in doctrinal or practical knowledge, much of this derives from social pressures. In fact, even in cases where women serve as resident priests within the Jōdo Shinshū Ōtani denomination, as Starling describes, mothers, local administrators, media, and temple parishioners themselves tend to take critical views of women in power. Feminist movements within this denomination, taken up in greater detail in chapter 6, point to the wartime era as one example of how women effectively filled the occupational gaps within the priesthood. Starling points out that during this seizure of religious authority, "it was on women's obligations as wives and daughters that their authority and responsibility to act as priests was founded" (p. 128); adult women became selectees for religious service because they were the "sole adult" in temples otherwise absent of men. This suitability of women for priesthood remains even today, though on different terms, as Starling shows through her interview with Hisako Yoshida, a *jūshoku* in the Honganji denomination. During Hisako's in-home pastoral visits (*otsukimairi*), parishioners appeared eager to divulge details about their own lives as soon as the sutra recitation stopped; women, more so than men, Hisako reflects, are open and receptive listeners. Thus, while public sentiment remains critical of a woman's ability to perform rituals or demonstrate a command over doctrine, Starling's interviews with Hisako reveal that women succeed in the pastoral aspects of service, or those through which men often maneuver with great difficulty. As she states, insofar as "*otsukimairi* serves a social or pastoral function, a woman's gender may serve her well in performing the work of a temple priest" (p. 124).

This cognitive gulf between the expectation of religious women to maintain a leadership role when the male priest is absent and the presumption of their inadequacy in performing such a task culminates

in Starling's final chapter, "Equality and Freedom in the Ōtani-ha." Here, Starling situates her study alongside those of other scholars who also see female agency as a negotiation between the opposite poles of feminist progressive politics and suppressive male power in premodern East Asia.[1] The imperative to explore female agency from between the limiting categories of "unwitting feminist" or "oppressed victim" emerges from the work of each of these scholars, and Starling continues in this vein by exploring other female desires that exist beyond the parameters of the role of the temple wife. Ultimately, Starling's exploration of female agency on a spectrum of desires in this final chapter soundly counters the social narrative that presupposes the female maternal and occupational desires outlined in chapter 1.

In many ways, the interpenetrative relationship between the "sacred" features of religion and the "mundane" work of temple care, the core binary to which Starling attends throughout her study, also emerges through the presentation of her findings. That is, just as *bōmori* are expected to weave Jōdo Shinshū teachings into their minute interactions and activities with lay patrons, Starling too weaves these same teachings ("other power," or *tariki*, pp. 67–71; "repaying debt to Amida," or *button hōsha*, pp. 74–75; karma and "connection," or *en*, pp. 91–96) into her own interactions with the reader as they engage her findings. Starling thereby subtly invites the reader to adopt the role of a curious parishioner; we are meant to visit the temple along with her, bear witness to the critical role that *bōmori* and female *jūshoku* play in the maintenance of both the temple space and parishioner ties, and see that a Jōdo Shinshū ethics, epistemology, and soteriology hold sway over the varied conceptions of this critical role. Above all, this subtle rhetorical tactic reminds us as readers that the lines that so often divide sacred and mundane experience are not razor-thin, but indiscernible. This is only one among many of Starling's successes as a writer and researcher. Her book will undoubtedly help to reshape conceptions of "religious work" in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition and,

1. She cites Dorothy Ko's *Cinderella Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Wendi Adamek's "A Niche of Their Own: The Power of Convention in Two Inscriptions for Medieval Chinese Buddhist Nuns," *History of Religions* 49, no. 1 (2009); and Lori Meeks's *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

ultimately, misperceptions surrounding the vital activities of women in maintaining this tradition.

Across all six chapters, Starling's prose is tight, controlled, and well-edited. I encountered one error in transliteration and one missing bibliographic entry. Otherwise, the overall editorial quality of this publication maintains the high standards of the press.