Introduction

DURING THE SECOND MONTH of the first year of the Kenchō era (1249), twelve women received the complete nuns’ monastic precepts (bikuni gusokukai) of the Four-Part Vinaya (Sifenlü, Jpns. Shibun ritsu) from the priest Eison (also “Eizon,” 1201–1290, aka Shien Shōnin, Kōshō Bosatsu). For several years, these women had been living as lay monastics in the dilapidated buildings of the ancient temple Hokkeji (the Lotus Temple) in Japan’s southern capital of Nara. Taking 348 vows from Eison in 1249, they received conferral not as privately professed nuns, as had long been customary for women pursuing the religious life in premodern Japan, but as full-fledged members of the Buddhist monastic community, or sangha (from the Sanskrit saṃgha). This ordination of twelve bikuni (Skt. bhikṣuṇī) marked the first time in at least four hundred years that a group of women took the entire set of nuns’ precepts in a manner recognized as legitimate by the male authorities of a Buddhist monastic institution in Japan.

Led by their sixty-five-year-old female master, Jizen (b. 1187), this small group of women laid the groundwork for a large-scale revival of women’s monasticism in Japan. Within just a few years following their decision to take the bikuni vows from Eison, the thirteenth-century restorers of Hokkeji had transformed the convent—which had been founded in 741 but had since suffered through numerous cycles of decline and partial renovation—from a humble practice hall housing a small group of privately professed nuns into a vast cultic center that supported the religious practices of hundreds of women, including formally ordained nuns, novices, resident devotees, and members of the laity. What is more, Hokkeji’s restoration spurred the revival or initial founding of as many as thirteen other convents, or temples inhabited and managed by women who had taken monastic vows. This book is an in-depth study of the Hokkeji revival movement and its place in the history of Buddhism in premodern Japan.

The significance of Hokkeji’s medieval revival greatly exceeds what the numbers associated with its medieval following might suggest. For while the movement directly involved only several hundred women and a handful of institutions, its success in granting institutional authenticity to religious women is emblematic of a broader shift in the religious and social landscape.
of medieval Japan. The revival of Hokkeji carried great symbolic value, for it was Hokkeji that had been designated during the 740s as the official state model for and administrative head of provincial convents established in accordance with the 741 edict issued by Shōmu Tennō (701–756) and his coruler, Queen-Consort Kōmyō (701–760), who called for a pair of state temples—one convent (kokubunniji) and one male monastery (kokubunji)—to be erected in each of the sixty-six provinces and three islands under Yamato control. Nuns and monks appointed to positions in these state temples were recognized as state-bureaucrat priests (kansō). They received stipends from the state and carried out rituals on its behalf. Hokkeji had been recognized in this context as the sister institution of the great Nara temple Tōdaiji, a male monastery regarded as the administrative head of the entire state temple network. Hokkeji’s legacy as a great temple of the state—and as Japan’s foremost convent—meant that its large-scale restoration in the thirteenth century was viewed as an event of extraordinary consequence.

The state temple network established during the eighth century flourished for only a brief period, perhaps a century, before losing influence in the face of declining state support and the growing ideological and political dominance of exoteric-esoteric Buddhist (kenmitsu) institutions. As state monasteries and convents receded into the shadows of history, some temple buildings were converted into Tendai or Shingon monasteries, while others faced wholesale neglect (Shirai 1989, 120). By the early years of the Heian period (794–1186), state convents had begun to disappear from the historical record. Some were converted into male monastic institutions, and others, like Hokkeji, were largely abandoned. There is evidence that privately professed nuns and female pilgrims or other traveling women may have taken up residence in the neglected remains of former convents, but these sites were no longer recognized as state-authorized monastic institutions for women. By the early years of the ninth century, the state no longer provided for nuns financially, nor did it employ nuns (in this context best understood as female priests) in state rituals and ceremonies.

It would be nearly four centuries before Buddhist groups in Japan would reintroduce clerical positions for women. During the middle years of the Kamakura period (1186–1336)—especially the mid-to-late thirteenth century—various religious movements active on the fringes of kenmitsu orthodoxy, including the vinaya revival movement in the southern capital of Nara, the burgeoning Zen movements, and the numerous Pure Land schools, became interested in the question of women’s inclusion in the priesthood. The establishment of a formally recognized nuns’ ordination platform at Hokkeji in the mid-1200s was the most visible manifestation of this shift in monastic attitudes toward women, but other groups were also reconsidering the place of women in monastic institutions. In the years following the Hokkeji revival, formally ordained nuns suddenly reappeared, as did fully authorized monastic institutions for women. From the late thirteenth century onward, the convent reemerged as a basic social institution.
In some cases, the remains of old convents from the Nara period (712–793) were restored; in others, monasteries were converted into convents, or new buildings were erected as convents. By the late medieval period, hundreds of monastic institutions for women were in operation (Ushiyama 1989; 1990, 160). While it is true that these institutions were never recognized as the equals of male monastic institutions, officially ordained nuns and their convents retained, from this era onward, a continuous role in Japan’s religious history.

Diminished state control over ordination procedures helped make the ordination of nuns possible again in the Kamakura period. During the Nara period, law required monastic ordinands to receive state consent in the form of ordination certificates. Although the state maintained some of this authority, at least nominally, throughout the premodern and early modern periods, new ordination lineages not regulated by the state grew in number during the Kamakura period. Eison, for one, carried out his vinaya-style ordinations independently of the state ordination certification system (see Matsuo 2004b, 22–23). In his eyes, it was faithfulness to the
vinaya that made an ordination official. In the view of the state, however, those ordained by Eison were not kansō, or “state-bureaucrat priests,” but rather tonseisō, or “world-renouncer priests.” Eison, then, was working from a different concept of authority when he offered ordination to women: the legitimacy of his ordinations was based not in state authority but in his adherence to the vinaya, or monastic disciplinary codes. So while his ordinations did make women official nuns in the eyes of the sangha, they did not render them female priests of state (kanni), as Nara-period state ordinations had. This shift in authority—in who was able to determine what counted as “official”—reflects the degree to which religious institutions had grown independent of state authority by the Kamakura period. These issues will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3.

Earlier treatments of female monasticism in Japan have tended to work from the assumption that the decline of convents from the late Nara period and over the course of the Heian period can be explained as an outgrowth of certain androcentric Buddhist discourses. Scholars believe that three teachings in particular shaped views of women in early Japanese Buddhist discourses: the five obstacles (goshō or itsutsu no sawari), which, as cited in the Lotus Sutra, holds that there are five ranks in the Buddhist cosmos—including that of Buddha—that cannot be attained in a female body; the thrice following (sanjū), which refers to the idea, based in the Laws of Manu and cited in numerous Confucian texts as well, that the fate of women is to be subservient to three categories of men (fathers, husbands, and sons) throughout their lives; and the theory of henjō nanshi (transformation into a male body), which holds that there exist various methods through which the bodies of women seeking enlightenment may be rendered male.4 Studies that view the import and spread of these teachings as responsible for the decline of convents in Japan have also tended to view Hokkeji’s reemergence in the medieval period as an event made possible through certain doctrinal and ideological innovations that challenged orthodox Buddhist views of women and their prospects on the Buddhist path (e.g., Matsuo 1989, 2001).

Although the male monastic order of the thirteenth century did indeed invoke these androcentric Buddhist teachings to explain the absence of women among its institutional hierarchies, the early-Heian-period decline of convents cannot be directly attributed to their spread among the general populace. None of these teachings entered the popular discourse for at least a century after the last state-sanctioned nuns’ ordination took place in Japan. And it was several centuries after the last official ordination of nuns—which took place sometime in the early ninth century—before large numbers of ordinary laypeople began to demonstrate knowledge of and concern over the five obstacles, the thrice following, and strategies for transforming female bodies into male ones.

It would also be a mistake to understand these androcentric teachings as having formed a dominant ideology against which the thirteenth-century nun-revivalists of Hokkeji asserted themselves. Scholarly focus on the doc-
trinal significance of Hokkeji’s reemergence has tended to overstate the
degree to which the convent’s restoration signified a break with prevailing
views of women’s roles as Buddhists. It has also tended to obscure the degree
to which Hokkeji’s restoration can be understood as continuous with cer-
tain popular religious practices on the ground, practices that were largely
unconcerned with recondite discourses on the female body and the nature
of women’s salvation. The story of Hokkeji’s restoration suggests that the
androcentric teachings mentioned above were not as visible in Kamakura-
period public lay discourse as scholars have tended to assume. Ordinary
laypeople may have been aware of the fact that many Buddhist institutions,
especially training centers situated atop mountains, were closed to women,
but only the most elite of laypeople were concerned with or knowledgeable
about the specifics of androcentric Buddhist doctrine.

Recent scholarship has suggested that the decline of officially recog-
nized convents in the early Heian period was linked to broader shifts in
the institutional structure and ritual emphasis of Japanese monastic life. In
particular, the growth and popularization of Tendai, Shingon, and other lin-
exages centered on mikkyō, or esoteric Buddhist practice, account for much
of the institutional decline of convents. As Katsuura (2007) has explained,
esoteric masters like Saichō (766–822) and Kūkai (774–835) imported pro-
tocols from China, many of them based in Daoist practices, that empha-
sized mountain ascetic training and viewed the presence of women as
ritually defiling. The monastic centers that gained great political visibility
over the course of the Heian period—places like Mount Hiei and Mount
Kōya—thus forbade the entrance of women, creating a situation in which
women were denied the opportunity to train at Japan’s most prestigious
Buddhist institutions. In short, the growing dominance of esoteric institu-
tions, which emphasized mountain asceticism and ritual procedures that
excluded women, was largely responsible for the Heian-period decline of
female monastic institutions. As Japanese society came to privilege esoteric
Buddhism, nuns, who did not have access to esoteric monastic training, were
placed on the level of institutional practice. While this view of the decline
of convents still reflects the influence of androcentric ideology, it does so in
a less direct way: changing social or even doctrinal views of women did not
necessarily lead to changes in institutional practice, but rather the adoption
and popularization of newly imported ritual protocols that called for the
exclusion of women led to the decline of female monastic institutions and
eventually to the spread of androcentric Buddhist rhetoric among ordinary
laypeople. Chapter 3 will treat these issues in greater depth.

Previous studies on Hokkeji have tended to credit the priest Eison for
the convent’s remarkable medieval restoration (Hosokawa 1989a, 1997,
1989b; Hosokawa and Tabata 2002; Matsuo 2001). As part of a larger cam-
paign to restore old temples, especially those that had been destroyed dur-
ing the violent conflicts of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries,
Eison and his followers became involved in the revival of Hokkeji, as well
as in the establishment of as many as fourteen other monastic centers for
women during the mid- and late thirteenth century (Ōishi 2001, 42–45; Ushiyama 1989, 264–269). Driven by the conviction that their contemporaries had failed to take the vinaya precepts seriously and were thus practicing an inauthentic form of Buddhism, Eison and his followers called for a return to what they understood to be the original Buddhism of India and China. Above all else, they emphasized close adherence to the disciplinary codes of the vinaya. Adopting the motto kōbō rijō, “fostering the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings,” Eison and his followers engaged in a variety of restorationist activities from the late 1230s. It was around this time that Eison also began to restore the Nara temple Saidaiji, where he eventually established a new ordination platform and launched a widely successful vinaya revival movement.

In order to restore the precepts fully, Eison and his disciples believed it necessary to reestablish all seven divisions within the sevenfold assembly: fully ordained monks, fully ordained nuns, postulate nuns, novice priests, novice nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Four of these seven divisions were to be filled by women. By this time, however, Japan’s Buddhist community had long accepted the absence of official, state-sponsored women’s ordination lineages. Although small, private hermitages for women did sometimes maintain their own forms of initiation or ordination, such rituals fell outside the domain of state-sponsored precepts ordination platforms and were, at least in the view of the major monastic centers like Nara and Mount Hiei, considered incomplete or unofficial (Katsuura 1989, 23). Rejecting such unorthodox forms of ordination for women, Eison and his disciples believed that the vinaya could not be fully restored in Japan without the reestablishment of a nuns’ precepts ordination platform sanctioned by the Buddhist order and the reopening of “official” convents (see Groner 2005, esp. 221–229).

In telling the story of their interactions with women at Hokkeji, Eison and his disciples portrayed their willingness to ordain women as exceptional and praised themselves for their generosity and compassion toward women. Given the greater rhetorical arc of Saidaiji writing, which emphasizes the extraordinary nature of Eison’s commitment to the realization of a more rigorously “authentic” sangha in Japan, it is hardly surprising that Eison and his disciples portrayed their interactions with women as yet another indication of how they differed from the Japanese monastic mainstream. The self-aggrandizing function of Saidaiji literature thus skews its presentation of Hokkeji’s restoration. That said, it is clear that Eison and his disciples did distinguish themselves from the monastic norm insofar as they offered full bikuni precepts to large groups of women. What Saidaiji literature is not clear about, however, is the degree to which nuns and laywomen were active in Japanese temple life long before the revival of Hokkeji. In particular, Saidaiji texts ignore the unofficial, less institutionalized, and more lay-oriented models of nunhood already in practice at small hermitages and temples before Eison’s involvement with convents like Hokkeji. Stressing his ordinations of women as events of great magnitude, Eison tended to
downplay both the efforts of the nuns themselves and the degree of organization already in place at temples like Hokkeji before his arrival on the scene. In presenting the revival of Hokkeji and other convents in this fashion, Saidaiji literature attributes the successful revival of female monasticism almost entirely to Eison and his group of male clerics. Contemporary scholarly analyses of Hokkeji’s revival have also tended to privilege Saidaiji documents, thereby perpetuating the Saidaiji view that Buddhist women were dependent upon the mediation of male priests.

My study of Hokkeji attempts to balance the ideological significance of the Hokkeji restoration with careful attention to those aspects of the revival that did not engage Buddhist doctrine in a sustained or focused manner. In reading texts composed by Hokkeji nuns against the doctrine-oriented writings of Saidaiji’s male monastics, I was first struck by the type of disjuncture observed by Caroline Walker Bynum in her studies of medieval Christian ascetics. Much as Bynum’s work points to differences in male and female readings and usages of religious imagery in medieval Christian Europe, texts written by women involved in the Hokkeji revival suggest discrepancies between the ways in which men and women in premodern Japan received, interpreted, and used Buddhist teachings about gender (see Bynum 1991, 151–179). Documents written by women involved in the restoration of Hokkeji relate the story of their movement in ways that diverge, often radically, from Saidaiji narratives. Unlike Saidaiji texts, which emphasize both women’s weak position in the Buddhist cosmos and their reliance upon the mercy of male priests, the texts associated with the women’s order do not treat gender as a problem. They also downplay men’s roles in the restoration of Hokkeji and other convents, focusing instead on the contributions of nuns—women whom they portray as self-reliant and confident.

The task of analyzing these differences is a worthwhile project in and of itself, especially given the fact that previous scholarship has interpreted Hokkeji’s revival from a Saidaiji-centric perspective, failing to examine materials associated with Hokkeji’s archives in any detail. But my project aims to move beyond this single task and to place the revival of Hokkeji in a broader sociocultural context. In doing so, it demonstrates that ideological disjunctures, even those pertinent to the relationship between gender and soteriological discourse, are not clearly split along gendered lines: that is, one cannot necessarily distinguish “male” and “female” views of women’s salvation and religiosity. Other markers of difference—ordination status, social class, and educational background—also serve as indicators of how particular individuals viewed women, their salvation, and their place in the Buddhist order. We see a greater correlation between views of women’s salvation held by male and female members of the aristocratic classes, for example, than between those held by male monks and ordinary laymen. Gender alone is not a reliable determinant of how individual historical actors understood women’s salvation. So while Hokkeji materials do suggest that male scholar-priests and nuns, though both part of the monastic order in a large sense, tended to approach issues surrounding women’s relationship
to Buddhism in vastly different ways, these materials also demonstrate that gender difference was only one part of a complex social equation.

In addition to providing an opportunity to reevaluate the ways in which women interpreted and practiced Buddhism in premodern Japan, then, texts of Hokkeji and related convents also draw us toward a fuller understanding of Buddhism on the ground, Buddhism as it was understood and practiced by those not occupying scholarly positions at elite monasteries. Especially relevant in this regard is the fact that Hokkeji documents show little interest in doctrine. “Popular” and other nondoctrinal texts are central to this study, which understands Buddhism as a set of institutions, practices, and cultural motifs that is only partially informed by doctrine. The task of understanding how women understood and participated in Buddhism requires an interdisciplinary, intertextual approach that challenges the tendency of Buddhist studies to privilege doctrinal texts over social and ritual practice.

In piecing together the story of Hokkeji’s medieval revival and its significance in the religious history of premodern Japan, I draw on a wide variety of sources, including materials ranging from state histories and Buddhist scriptures to ritual texts, popular narratives, temple origin stories (engi), pilgrimage records (junrei), sermon collections, scriptural commentaries, biographies, diaries, fund-raising documents, name registers, and written prayer requests. Read in toto, these texts do not merely offer a new understanding of women’s roles in Japanese Buddhist communities, they also challenge contemporary scholarly images of Japanese Buddhism. In particular, they speak to the social nature of Buddhist temple-shrine complexes,
thus providing a better sense of how monks and nuns actually lived and worked on a daily basis. These texts also reflect the everyday assumptions, hierarchies, and practices that structured the social and religious worlds of monastic life. They broaden our understanding of how Buddhist doctrine was transmitted on the ground, of how ordinary laypeople from different backgrounds came into contact with Buddhist teachers, doctrines, and practices. This book thus aims to contribute not only to growing literature on women and Buddhism but also to recent research on the social life of Buddhist temples and monastic communities. Issues particularly relevant in the study include the function of the precepts in monastic life; the role of ritual and ceremony in temple life; the social and educational lives of monasteries; the relationship between Buddhism and other cultural values, such as courtliness and filiality; and the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and practice, both inside and outside the monastery.

The Question of Agency

Japanese scholarship on religious women in premodern Japan, especially that focusing on Buddhism, has flourished since the late 1980s. In 1984, Ōsumi Kazuo and Nishiguchi Junko founded a Japan-based research group devoted to the study of women and Buddhism in Japanese history. Just five years later, the group published *Shirīzu josei to Bukkyō* (Series on women and Buddhism), a four-volume collection of essays on women and Buddhism, broadly defined, in Japanese history and literature. These volumes, combined with Nishiguchi’s groundbreaking 1987 work *Onna no chikara: Kodai no josei to Bukkyō* (The strength of women: Women and Buddhism in the ancient period), set the stage for the further development of the field over the course of the 1990s.

Interest in women and Buddhism in Japan—how women’s bodies were represented in Buddhist texts, how women themselves understood and practiced Buddhism, how women interacted with Buddhist institutions—also grew in the West, where the field was established largely through the work of Barbara Ruch, a scholar of literature who also heads the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies at Columbia University, as well as a recently established center in Kyoto devoted both to the study of women in Buddhist culture and to the preservation of imperial convents. In addition to authoring her own Japanese-language monograph on women and Buddhism in 1991 (*Mō hitotsu no chūseizō: Bikuni, otogizōshi, raise; Another way of looking at the medieval period: Nuns, short story booklets, and the afterlife*), Ruch also edited the 2002 volume *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, the first English-language volume to treat the history of women and Buddhism in Japan.

One of the major debates to emerge as this new field has developed has centered on the relationship between nunhood—and Buddhist practice more generally—and women’s agency. Put simply, scholars have disagreed on this question: Did women’s participation in Buddhist monastic life
enable them to create meaning in a patriarchal society, or did it merely lend additional institutional and ideological support for their subjugation?

Approaches to the question of agency have varied, but most follow one of two trends: (1) that which describes convents as places of great oppression or (2) that which portrays convents as liberating, all-female spaces that allowed women to escape the constraints of marriage and family life. The first view, which understands Buddhist institutions as unilaterally oppressive of women, is the most dominant, especially in Japanese scholarship. This tendency can be attributed at least partially to the long-standing influence in the Japanese academy of Marxist analysis, which is inclined to view religious institutions as repressive. In Marxist-style Japanese scholarship, nuns and convents are described in the bleakest of terms. Convents, the argument goes, absorbed Japan’s “used” and “unusable” women—the widowed, the sick, the aged, and the unmarriageable. Adding insult to injury, these institutions then forced already downtrodden women to pray both for rebirth into male bodies and for the salvation of the very fathers and husbands who had oppressed them throughout their lives (Hosokawa 1987, 1989a, 1989b; Matsuo 1989, 2001). Following this logic, several prominent historians in Japan have arrived at the conclusion that women living in medieval convents must have spent their years as nuns in misery. Some, citing disparaging views of the female body found in Buddhist literature, have commented that nuns must have suffered from a great sense of self-alienation. Others have gone so far as to argue that the severity of male domination in the monastic society of medieval Japan would have suppressed and even precluded women’s personal investment in Buddhist training and study.¹²

On the other side are scholars who suggest that convents were places that afforded women a certain degree of freedom. Barbara Ruch, in particular, calls medieval nunhood a “radical” and “revolutionary path of freedom.” This seemingly extreme stance is couched in caveats, however, as the freedom she speaks of here emerges only in contrast to what she describes as the harsh conditions of women’s lives in premodern Japan. Through much of the premodern period, she tells us, there were few decisions that women could make for themselves, and for women unhappy in their domestic circumstances, the only viable options for escape were suicide, nunhood, and prostitution. For Ruch, then, nunhood represented a safe haven for women distraught or unhappy in their present circumstances. And for some women, such as the Zen nun Mugai Nyodai (1223–1298), she adds, convent life provided an opportunity for scholarly pursuits as well (1991, 22–25).

Katsuura Noriko, too, has spoken of nunhood as providing women with a certain degree of freedom, though she is more cautious than Ruch in making this claim. Katsuura does not use words like “revolutionary” or “radical” to describe nunhood in the premodern period, but she does conclude that in renouncing the world and taking on the epithet of “nun” (ama or ni), women were able to claim more freedom and social respect than ordinary
laywomen. Using numerous examples from the Heian and Kamakura periods, she argues that women who became *shukke* (world renouncers) during these periods were no longer bound by wifely tasks and were free to leave their homes and husbands so as to focus their time and energy on religious endeavors. Although literary examples suggest that women were required to secure the permission of their husbands before renouncing the world, there are many stories of women who, eager to leave their homes and marriages, went to great extremes to secure the blessings of their husbands. There are also stories of women who ran away from husbands who refused to grant permission or who simply took the tonsure without spousal authorization. In addition to releasing women from the obligations of marriage, the status of nun, ambiguous as it may have been, also appears to have provided at least some women with a level of social authority not granted ordinary laywomen. To illustrate this point, Katsuura points to the fact that the women’s names listed in medieval guild (*za*) registers were typically those bearing aristocratic titles or those bearing the epithet “nun.” That “nun” was a socially powerful category is also demonstrated, she argues, by the fact that the prince Fushimi no Miya Sadausa (1372–1456) began to use honorific language toward his own daughters once they attained *bikuni* status (1995, 150–153).

Despite their willingness to entertain the notion that medieval convents provided women with a certain degree of freedom, refuge, and perhaps even social authority, Ruch and Katsuura are not naïve about the social and economic conditions that led many women to become nuns in the first place. Like those scholars who describe convents as institutions of oppression, Ruch and Katsuura also suggest that many women first took up nunhood because their husbands or fathers had died in violent conflicts, leaving them financially destitute. It is now common knowledge that a handful of convents, such as Zenmyōji, were established to house women whose husbands perished in the battles that marked the transition from the Heian period to the Kamakura (Ushiyama 1989, 231–238). Katsuura also cites examples of women who opted for nunhood when their husbands brought new women into the household. Ruch and Katsuura are thus sober in portraying the social constraints faced by women in premodern Japan. For many women, they suggest, the initial allure of the convent may have been less about pursuing a religious vocation than about escaping financial destitution or domestic humiliation.

Insofar as Ruch and Katsuura suggest that many women became nuns only because it was the best of several unattractive options, their perspective is not so different from that of the Marxist-influenced scholars described earlier. What distinguishes the approach of Ruch and Katsuura is that they view the convent itself in a different light. Whereas the other side understands the convent as an institutional arm of a dominant Buddhist ideology that offered women no respite, Ruch and Katsuura suggest that within the space of the convent, even those women who may have first become nuns for infelicitous reasons found ways to create meaning and dignity in their lives.
Moreover, their approaches, especially that of Ruch, allow for the possibility that at least some women may have become nuns not for wholly unhappy reasons, but rather because they were interested in studying Buddhist texts or in pursuing a life outside the confines of marriage and childbearing.

On this point, Tanaka Takako, in a personal account of experiences as a female scholar in Japan, has implied that many scholars working on women in premodern Japan are so inured to the social conditions of contemporary Japanese society that they cannot imagine how or why, barring coercion or desperation, a woman would choose life without marriage or children. Among male scholars of Buddhism in Japan, she points out, the tendency has been to assume that women who became nuns did so only because they had no other options and, furthermore, to describe the lives of women who did become nuns in the grimmest terms possible (2005, 166–171).

It is interesting to note, in contrast, that Western-language research on religious women in medieval Europe, especially that carried out by feminists, has tended to describe the motivations of female renunciants in a decidedly more positive way. An example: in her comprehensive study of Christian nuns, Jo Ann Kay McNamara argues that for many women in the early Christian movement, chastity represented a form of social protest; in embracing the status of virgin, she explains, women were able to declare themselves free from the obligations of marriage and family and to take on certain public roles typically reserved for men, such as teaching and social organizing. In other words, celibacy was thought to liberate women “from the disabilities of womanhood.” As bishops and other male figures in the Christian movement wrote admiringly of women who, refusing to marry, rebelled against the wishes of their pagan families, virginity became the object of great celebration and was embraced by many young women, much to the chagrin of those representing the traditional Greco-Roman social order (1996, 23–26, 47–48, 59).

So while women who voluntarily gave up their sexual lives in order to pursue the Christian faith in the Late Antique West are described as rebels who boldly resisted established social norms, women who became Buddhist nuns in medieval Japan are described as the victims of a rigidly patriarchal society. Undoubtedly, Christian groups in the ancient Mediterranean world and Buddhist groups in premodern Japan imagined religious women in markedly different ways and ascribed different values to the renunciation of women. At the same time, however, the general tone of interpretation—and in this case, the choice to interpret renunciation as an indication of protest or as a sign of victimhood—surely reflects the historian’s own biases.

In general, my study follows the approach of Ruch and Katsuura. Like Katsuura in particular, I have attempted to understand women’s reception of Buddhist discourse and participation in Buddhist practice without characterizing their relationships with Buddhism as either oppressive or liberating. I view Buddhist convents as sites that both transmitted and reproduced (though often in piecemeal fashion) dominant ideologies while simultaneously offering the tools—knowledge in various forms, textual, ritual,
economic—necessary for maneuvering through those ideologies. My study thus takes notice of ambiguities and incoherencies found in the histories of convents. Here I am indebted to Dorothy Ko, whose recent work (1994, 2005) provides a model of how women’s contributions to dominant systems of power in historical societies might be understood in a way that recognizes women’s agency without ascribing false consciousness.

Ko’s work, which focuses on the histories of Chinese women, calls for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between women and the dominant social ideology of Confucianism. Scholarship on women in China had long worked from the assumption that women struggled as “outsiders” against both the Chinese kinship system and the Confucian order that supported it. But Ko reasons that the very durability of Confucian social ideologies and institutions, which have been functioning and reproducing for so many centuries, implies that women had vested interests in their continuance. She demonstrates how women found contentment and meaning as they contributed to the success of the Confucian order, celebrating its moral ideals, embracing the roles it prescribed for them as women, and taking pride in gender-specific traditions like foot binding (1994, 8–9, 19; 2005). She also shows how, in exploiting the ambiguities of Confucianism, women crafted identities by cultivating their own artistic and literary talents and by creating societies of women that extended beyond the isolation of the “inner quarters,” where elite women were expected to remain hidden (1994, 192). Similar dynamics are at work in this study, which shows how Japanese convents both served the needs of the androcentric social order—by housing widows and the secret daughters of forbidden unions, for example—and at the same time allowed women to create their own communities of practice, to transmit their own forms of knowledge and ritual authority, and to establish traditions in which they could take pride.

Saba Mahmood’s work also encourages a reconsideration of the relationship between agency and resistance. In her study of women in Egyptian Muslim movements, Mahmood finds that the goals of liberal feminism often fail to recognize the “modalities of agency” found in non-Western and/or religiously fundamentalist cultures. She thus argues that scholars need to separate the analytical category of agency from the political project of feminism (2005, 153). Because liberal feminist understandings of agency are caught up in the telos of progressive politics, liberal feminists define agency through acts of resistance; that is, the liberal feminist scholar recognizes only those subjects who have defied, subverted, or manipulated the dominant patriarchal order (9). Mahmood urges scholars to reexamine liberal Western assumptions surrounding subject formation and to take up alternative approaches to the problem of agency. Her study forwards, in particular, the notion of “ethical agency,” which recognizes that religious actors typically frame their identity not through reaction against, but instead through the adoption of, values specific to their tradition (34–39). In drawing attention to the ethical agency of Muslim women in Egypt, Mahmood helps readers understand how and why certain women may find
practices based in androcentric or patriarchal teachings meaningful and even empowering.

Although this study does not apply the concept of ethical agency, it is inspired by the rationale behind Mahmood’s approach, and particularly by her insistence that we learn to recognize the multivalent nature of agency. As this study will demonstrate, it is never clear that the women of Hokkeji consciously resisted or subverted androcentric Buddhist discourse. In some discursive arenas, such as those discussed in chapter 7, they did ignore, or “talk past,” androcentric Buddhist teachings. And in others, such as those discussed in chapter 2, both male and female elites privileged practices downplaying the canonical notion that women faced great obstacles on the Buddhist path. But in many other instances, it was through the act of cultivating rather than resisting dominant ideologies that women in premodern Japan created meaningful social and religious lives. Women’s contributions to Buddhist practice and discourse, both as laywomen and as nuns, were often made in collaboration with male priests or with male members of their own families or social groups.

**Locating the Dominant Discourse**

In this work, which considers the religious landscape of premodern Japan, it is also necessary to reexamine assumptions about who or what represented the “dominant discourse.” Attention to the practical aspects of how Buddhist texts and ideas were disseminated, received, and put to use is also crucial. Although it may be tempting to assume that the writings of Buddhist scholar-priests represent the dominant discourse of the period, it is not clear that this was actually the case. When comparing the doctrinal texts of Japanese scholar-priests with contemporaneous literary materials, it is evident that doctrinal texts did not simply reflect mainstream cultural assumptions of the day. Instead, they represented the opinions of a special class of learned individuals who served as the mediators between difficult continental texts and broader Japanese society. While their interpretations of Buddhist texts were respected in certain circles, they did not always represent dominant or mainstream views of what Buddhism was in the everyday lives of ordinary laypeople. Laypeople, and especially commoners, did not necessarily share the worldview transmitted in—or even understand all of the terms and ideas central to—the doctrinal writings of elite scholar-priests.

Given the importance attributed to texts and doctrine in the Judeo-Christian traditions, it is not surprising that Western scholars of religion, biased toward doctrinal understandings of religion, have tended to overemphasize the role of sacred texts when studying other traditions. Western studies of Japanese Buddhism (and to some extent Japanese studies of Japanese Buddhism as well, given the strong influence of the Western academy in the development of Buddhist studies) have also suffered from this bias. In particular, scholars have tended to assume that ordinary laypeople internal-
ized ideas found in the doctrinal texts of Buddhist scholar-priests and have sometimes been surprised by discrepancies between doctrine as conveyed in the writings of Japanese scholar-priests on the one hand and Buddhist ideas as reflected in contemporaneous popular literature on the other.

What one should keep in mind in noting such disparities, however, is that few lay Buddhists in Japan would have studied “Buddhism” as a holistic tradition: most had been exposed only to a smattering of disparate texts and rituals, and few had attempted to read and understand the contents of Buddhist texts on their own. Japan had no centralized Buddhist authority that dictated matters of doctrine. Knowledge of Buddhist texts was, on the whole, something transmitted via scholar-priests, who offered public lectures from time to time (some of which were later collected and transmitted in setsuwa, or short narrative, collections); explained Buddhist ideas through the explication of images (etoki); and sometimes, especially in the Kamakura period and later, exchanged letters with more educated lay followers. For most laypeople, Buddhism offered ritual practices thought capable of providing practical help in this life and the next. Buddhist priests were called upon to pray for the deceased and for the dying, to chant spells for the sick, to offer protective rites for women giving birth, and to carry out rituals aimed at granting the benefactor prosperity, long life, and rebirth in paradise. To seek comfort in this life and the next, laypeople carried out a variety of practices: simple chants and devotions, pilgrimages to holy sites, and the commissioning of various Buddhist objects and rituals, including everything from temples and sutra sets to stupas, images, and multiday ceremonies. For most laypeople, Buddhist practice had little, if anything, to do with the study of texts and doctrines. Although wealthy laypeople sometimes produced extravagant copies of sutras, they did so primarily as a means of creating karmic merit. And while many did learn how to recite certain Buddhist sutras, emphasis was typically placed on the spiritual merit earned through the act of chanting and not on the explication of textual content.

Given the laity’s uncertain grasp of doctrine, it remains unclear how widely known or influential the learning of Buddhist scholar-priests may have been. In evaluating the relationship between Buddhism and gender in premodern Japan, then, how much weight should be given to the writings of Buddhist scholar-priests? Were these texts of critical cultural influence, or should they be understood as the writings of an elite community of specialists whose ideas did not necessarily match those of the mainstream culture?

It is fair to assume that certain basic Buddhist concepts—the notion that all living beings experience rebirth through the six paths (rokudō), the impermanence of all things (mujō), the compassion of the bodhisattvas, the desirability of avoiding hell and gaining rebirth in heavens or pure lands, the notion that spiritual merit can be created and transferred, and even more complex ideas, such as original enlightenment (hongaku)—had, by the late Heian and early Kamakura periods, become part of the basic cul-
tural knowledge of the educated classes (LaFleur 1983; Stone 1999, 40–46). Many of these ideas, spread through literary production, popular storytelling, and ritual practice, are reflected in literature from the Nara period onward, by which time they had already begun to figure importantly in the cultural activities of the literate. By the Heian period, ideas about rebirth, the Pure Land, and the creation of spiritual merit guided many of the everyday activities of courtiers and other educated elites. And as any student of the Tale of Genji knows, impermanence (mujō) was a concept Heian courtiers regularly invoked to describe personal experiences.

But even as these ideas began to take hold, their spread was neither seamless nor systematic, and few laypeople scrutinized the details of doctrinal texts. The reception of Pure Land teachings offers an instructive example. Even in the Kamakura period, by which time Pure Land teachings had flourished in Japan for several centuries, average laypeople did not typically concern themselves with the intricacies of Pure Land doctrine when formulating their own images of the afterlife. Although Pure Land scriptures clearly state that the Pure Land is devoid of all markers of gender and sexuality (and, indeed, devoid of women altogether), premodern writers regularly noted with joy the prospect of being reunited with a lover in the Pure Land. It was common, for example, to pray that one would be reborn on the same lotus pedestal as one’s lover. In the Tale of Genji, Genji hopes that he and Murasaki will meet again in the Pure Land, where they will share a single lotus (NKBT, 4:174).14

As Dobbins points out, “It is inconceivable to think that Genji expected Murasaki to appear in the Pure Land as a male. It was a female Murasaki whom Genji had known in this life, and certainly it was a female Murasaki whom he longed to join in the Pure Land” (2004, 104–105).

Dobbins (2004) suggests that those interpretations of the Pure Land that do not match doctrinal specifications convey a disjuncture between “idealized” religion and “popular” belief, or “practiced religion.” In other words, while certain elite scholar-priests familiar with the intricacies of Pure Land texts—Chinkai (1091–1152), Hōnen (1133–1212), and Shinran (1173–1262), to name a few—did in fact emphasize, in their own treatises, that women did not exist in the Pure Land, most average laypeople were unaware of or uninterested in these doctrinal details. And although learned priests did sometimes seek to correct the doctrinal misunderstandings of laypeople, most appear to have been more or less tolerant of lay understandings of Buddhism. As long as laypeople exercised devotion by supporting local temples and clergy, few priests felt it necessary to ascertain the degree to which the views of ordinary laypeople corresponded to doctrinally orthodox positions.

In her innovative research on kishinjō (statements of a donors’ intentions in making Buddhist offerings) and ganmon (prayer requests written by donors making offerings), Nomura Ikuyo argues to the same effect. Against earlier scholarship, such as that of Taira Masayuki and Hosokawa Ryōichi, which cites single mentions of androcentric Buddhist ideology, usually in elite scholarly texts, to suggest that all laypeople in premodern Japan neces-
sarily understood the salvation of women to be a problem, Nomura undertakes a holistic study of offertory texts in order to survey the intentions with which laypeople made Buddhist offerings. In her study of 356 kishinjō and ganmon authored by women in the Kamakura ibun collection, Nomura discovers that only twenty, or a mere 6 percent, refer to androcentric Buddhist terms such as the five obstacles, the thrice following, and henjō nanshi. This empirical data allows Nomura to confute the widely held assumption that laypeople in the Heian and Kamakura periods had fully internalized the androcentric rhetoric of elite scholar-priests. Nomura’s research indicates that even educated laywomen in Kamakura Japan appear not to have been terribly concerned with the karmic burdens of womanhood; this rhetoric, which can be found in the texts of contemporaneous elite scholar-priests, is for the most part absent in the kishinjō and ganmon of women. On the whole, women asked for the same things that men asked for: long life, physical health, and rebirth in paradise (2004, 106–107).

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Hokkeji-centered nuns’ revival movement is that surviving records about the movement display no sustained interest in doctrines concerning soteriological challenges particular to women. Many of the scholar-priests associated with the vinaya revival movement, on the other hand, had, like their Tendai counterparts, studied doctrinal texts carefully and were determined to share their findings—that women were inferior to men and required special methods of salvation—with female followers. As Nomura has shown, and as the work of Abe Yasurō has also suggested, such ideas were alien to Japan, where women had to be taught that their bodies were problematic, that they should pray for rebirth in male bodies, and that they faced greater spiritual obstacles than men (Nomura 2004, 98, 101, 112; Abe 1998, 66–76). In studying the texts written by nuns affiliated with Hokkeji, then, we can interpret the fact that they do not mention the karmic obstacles of women in one of two ways: as evidence that, even as late as the mid-Kamakura period, androcentric ideology was not yet part of the mainstream Buddhist discourse in which educated laypeople engaged or as evidence that some women, though aware that the dominant discourse problematized women’s bodies, chose to “talk past,” or ignore, these ideas and to emphasize instead those aspects of Buddhist practice and doctrine that did not view womanhood as problematic.

Undoubtedly, the situation was mixed: while the observations of Dobbins and Nomura offer compelling evidence that ordinary laypeople had not fully internalized androcentric Buddhist doctrines, the nuns associated with the Hokkeji revival movement were not mere laywomen but were individuals who had sought an unusual level of textual and ritual training. Unlike ordinary laywomen, then, Hokkeji nuns—at least the more elite stratum of nuns at Hokkeji—had undertaken Buddhist study under the direction of scholar-priests. It is thus hard to imagine that they could have been unaware of the growing prominence among scholar-priests of Buddhist theories that problematized the female body. Why, then, did Hokkeji nuns not treat these theories in their own writings? Were they taking a stand...
Introduction

against Saidaiji discourse, or did they feel that such discourse was peripheral to the more mainstream concerns of their followers—issues such as rebirth in the Pure Land, devotion to Buddhist deities, and the salvation of loved ones?

Revival activity at Hokkeji took place during an important historical moment, for up until this point, disparaging views of the female body were not yet part of those Buddhist teachings that had become truly mainstream in Japan. But during the very same years in which Hokkeji restored a precepts’ platform for women and established itself as an important site in the southern capital, male scholar-priests intent on creating in Japan a more “authentic” sangha based more closely on foreign models became increasingly vociferous in their teachings against the female body. Eventually, the spread of Buddhist teachings that problematized the female body did enter the dominant discourse. By the late fourteenth century, the notion that women were fated to enter the blood bowl hell, a special hell that punished women for the bloody discharges of the female body, had begun to circulate within Japan. By the early years of the Edo period (1603–1867), it had become standard protocol to bury women with copies of the Blood Bowl Sutra (Ketsubonkyō or Ketsubongyō).

This study thus focuses upon a period in which dominant social discourses, far from being fixed, were in flux. It further argues for greater attention to the dynamics of discourse formation: Buddhist scholar-priests, though influential in certain domains, did not have the last word when it came to determining mainstream beliefs and practices. This study challenges the assumption that scholarly Buddhist texts can be interpreted as representative of contemporaneously held beliefs and instead seeks to use more subtle means of determining the vectors of mainstream or dominant discourses in late-Heian and Kamakura Japan.

Terminology

Since the nineteenth century, Western scholars of Buddhism have relied upon the language of Christianity to explain the nature of Buddhist institutions and practices. This study, too, will employ the terms “monk,” “priest,” “nun,” and “ordination,” primarily for the sake of convenience. One should be aware, however, that these terms suggest only rough equivalents to the Christian case when used in the context of Japanese history. To warn the reader of important differences, this section will provide modified definitions of these terms.

Let us first consider the terms “monk” and “priest.” Scholars have employed these terms almost interchangeably as translations of seng (Jpns. sō) and biqiu (Jpns. bikini). Seng was an abbreviation for sengqie (Jpns. sōka or sōgya), meant to approximate the Sanskrit term samgha, or community. The term biqiu, on the other hand, was the most widely used
Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term bhikṣu and referred to individual members of the Buddhist community. The Sanskrit term bhikṣu was not associated with Buddhism in particular but was used more broadly to refer to world renouncers, or those who beg for food. Bhikṣu was often used, for example, to describe those who had entered the fourth and last stage of the brahmanic life cycle. In its Buddhist usage, however, the term came to refer specifically to men who had taken full vows of renunciation (that is, the 227 precepts of the Pali Vinaya or the 250 precepts of the Four-Part Vinaya), in contrast to novices. In Sanskrit, then, saṃgha referred to the Buddhist order as a whole, while bhikṣu referred to an individual member of the Buddhist order who took full vows and sustained himself through begging. In East Asia, however, seng and biqiu came to be used almost indistinguishably, with both terms referring to individuals who had renounced the world and joined a Buddhist order. Similarly, the Japanese equivalents of these terms—sō and biku—were both used to refer to male members of the Buddhist order. The primary difference between the terms was that sō came to be used in a broader sense and was eventually used to refer to anyone who had renounced the world (chujiazhe, Jpns. shukkesha). As the more generic term, sō was the word usually chosen for use in state documents and the like, while biku was chosen when an author wanted to emphasize the spiritual training or status of the sō in question.

As mentioned earlier, sō and biku have been rendered as both “priest” and “monk” in English. This method is imprecise, however, for while the English terms “priest” and “monk” suggest different occupations and ordination status, the terms sō and biku, if used to mark any differences at all, point only to different levels of commitment within the same occupation. In English, the term “priest” has long referred to members of the clergy who have received ordination from a bishop, granting them the authority to perform rites on behalf of a given community. “Monk,” on the other hand, refers to religious, especially contemplatives, who separate themselves from the secular world to live under monastic rule. Unless ordained as priests, monks were not to perform those duties that required priestly authority, such as the Eucharist and confession. Unlike priests who served parishes, then, monks were ideally to distance themselves from the lay world, focusing instead on a life of prayer and study shared with other renunciants. Although abbots and other monks did often receive priestly ordination in order to perform rites on behalf of the monastic community, they tended to distinguish themselves from “secular” priests, who lived outside monastic rule and served lay communities.18

In the case of Japanese Buddhism, sō and biku sometimes behaved like priests, providing ritual services for the lay community, and sometimes behaved like monks, separating themselves from the secular world at large and concentrating on a life of secluded study. In his recent overview of Japanese religions, Richard Bowring addresses this issue by using the term “priest” to designate those sō who functioned primarily as state ritualists and the term “monk” to designate those sō who lived in religious communities.
and focused on scholarly pursuits. According to Bowring, early Japanese sō are best understood as priests, since their primary function was to perform rituals on behalf of the state. It was not until the eighth-century establishment of monastic centers in Nara, he suggests, that Japanese sō began to resemble monks in the Western sense of the term (2005, 98–99).

It should be noted, however, that even after Japanese sō began to take on monklike qualities, they tended to retain, at least as a group, the priestly functions that defined sō during Buddhism’s earliest years in Japan. Unlike the Christian case, in which monks and priests pursued fundamentally different career paths, most Japanese sō spent time at monastic institutions and performed both priestly and monkish roles. In particular, those who had risen through the ranks of the sangha would usually split their time between serving members of the laity, usually in exchange for financial contributions or gifts; performing rituals at their home institutions, a number of which, especially from the early medieval period onward, were open to lay auditors; and teaching their own disciples. Their work, then, was aimed both at the lay public and at those training within the monastery. For this reason, I will refer to those sō who frequently undertook visibly priestly duties as “priests” and those who were less clearly engaged in public ministerial and ceremonial roles as “monks.” It should be noted, however, that Buddhist institutions did not themselves distinguish between “priests” and “monks.” Moreover, in the case of Nara- and early-Heian-period institutions, such as the state monastery-convent pairs discussed in chapter 1, monks and nuns at state temples performed rituals on behalf of the state—and thus had a priestly function—but appear to have had only limited involvement in the ritual lives of their local lay communities. For this reason, I tend to refer to these clerics as “monks” and “nuns” when treating them as a group, even though their positions required them to perform rituals for the state.

Ordination also carried a different set of meanings in the Buddhist case. Since the seventh century, Christianity has generally recognized a difference between taking vows, which monks and nuns do, and taking orders, or receiving priestly ordination, which bestows one with the authority to perform certain solemn rites (eventually designated “sacraments”) like baptism, the Eucharist, and last rites. In the Buddhist case, there was no ritual category similar to that of the sacraments. In most Buddhist societies, there was a clear distinction made between taking vows as a layperson, which usually involved only a simple ceremony, and taking full vows and receiving initiation into the sangha, which was usually carried out in a more complex ceremony that required the participation of ten fully ordained bhikṣu. Among bhikṣu who had taken full vows, however, there was no further distinction between those allowed to perform public rites and those not; such opportunities were to be granted (and in many cases sought) in accordance with one’s individual intellectual and spiritual progress and did not require additional ceremonies or ordinations.19

In Japan, as in many Buddhist societies, there were few general rules regarding teaching and the performance of rituals. What did develop in
Japanese monasteries, and at the Japanese court, was a system of official ceremonial positions that reflected the structure and logic of Confucian bureaucracy. Monk-priests who sought traditional advancement within state and monastic hierarchies strove to receive appointments as lecturers and cantors in large-scale ceremonies (hōe) held at monastic institutions and at court. Certain annual ceremonies, such as the Ceremony for the Vimalakīrti Sūtra (Yuima-e) performed at Kōfukuji, the Ceremony for the Golden Light Sutra (Saishō-e) performed at Yakushiji, and the Vegetarian Ceremony (Misai-e, also Gosai-e) performed at court, were especially prestigious (see Sangō 2007; Ruppert 2000, 360). Those granted visible roles in such ceremonies were marked as the most accomplished and celebrated figures in the monastic world and were more or less guaranteed secure positions for the remainder of their careers.

But while the lecturer and cantor positions of elite ceremonial performances were limited to a handful of privileged priests, there was nothing to prevent ordinary monks, or indeed anyone claiming the status of a world renouncer, from carrying out roles in less prestigious versions of major ceremonies, performing other types of rituals, or preaching. Thus, while advancement within the traditional monastic hierarchy did indeed reflect one’s mastery of certain texts and ritual techniques, those occupying the lower echelons of the official monastic hierarchy, and even those who remained on its fringes, were not barred by state or religious law from engaging in priestly activities such as preaching and ritual performance. In this sense, the relationships between clerical status, ordination, and ritual authority were, on the whole, more fluid in Japanese Buddhist institutions than in Christian ones.20

Understanding this fluidity is especially important when considering the case of ama, usually rendered as “nuns,” in Japan. In traditional Christian usage, nuns are viewed as the female counterparts of monks. And thus, like monks who have not received priestly ordination, nuns have not “taken orders” and are not recognized as having the authority to perform sacraments or to preach to members of the laity.21 In the case of East Asia, however, Buddhism made no clear distinction between priests and monks; instead, seng and biqiu were used as practically interchangeable terms to refer to male members of the clergy who performed both priestly and monkish duties. The female counterparts of seng and biqiu were niseng (Jpns. nisō) and biqiuni (Jpns. bikuni, from the Sanskrit bhikṣuṇī). Just as male renouncers in Japan were often referred to simply as sō, female renouncers were often referred to as ama, the Japanese-style reading of the Chinese character ni.

Behavioral codes for the sangha made it clear that bhikṣuṇī were to answer to bhikṣu. In addition to the fact that bhikṣuṇī were required to take about one hundred more precepts than their male counterparts, they were also to uphold the aṭṭha garu-dhammā, or eight rules of respect (bajingjie, Jpns. hakkyōkai). Among these special rules was one that required bhikṣuṇī to bow down to all bhikṣu, even those who were their juniors; one that forbade
bhikṣunī from rebuking bhikṣu (though bhikṣu could rebuke their female counterparts); and one that required bhikṣunī to take male, rather than female, members of the sangha as their preceptors. That the sangha was to be headed by its male members, then, was never in question. But what separates the Buddhist from the Christian case is that there were no Buddhist regulations that specifically forbade bhikṣunī from preaching to laypeople or from performing public rituals and ministerial services. In this sense, then, Buddhist nuns had the potential to act as what we might call “nun-priests.”

In Christian Europe, by contrast, debates over the ordination of women, which have spanned nearly two millennia, have been bound up with concerns over the degree to which women should be granted teaching, ministerial, and sacerdotal roles in the church. As ordination came to be understood as a sacrament that bestowed one with public authority for teaching and ministry, church leaders did what they could to ensure that such authority would remain in the hands of men. Some of the first waves of censure came in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Councils of Laodicea (mid-to-late fourth c.), Nimes (late fourth c.), and Orange (441) forbade women from acquiring clerical positions, including that of the deaconess, and from taking part in liturgical services (Rossi 1991, 83). In 494, Pope Gelasius I issued additional legislation, this time prohibiting the wives of bishops from performing services and ministries at the altar (McNamara 1996, 59). The issue gained broad attention again in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when a number of prominent church scholars began developing formal arguments against the ordination of women, this time providing various (and often contradictory) theological and philosophical views to support the position. Medieval canonists insisted that only priests had the right to preach and to perform sacraments: monks and nuns, no matter how learned they might be, were never to preach in public. Some forbade women, including nuns, from offering incense at the altar and handling ritual implements such as linens and vessels. Others prohibited women from even approaching the altar or entering the sanctuary. Faced with the task of interpreting canons from earlier centuries, which mention deaconesses in passing, a number of medieval commentators insisted that the deaconesses to which these canons refer did not “have orders,” that is, that they had not gained authentic ordination and did not have the authority to do anything beyond singing or reciting prayers during certain services. Others denied that the position of deaconesses had ever been valid at all (Martin 1986, esp. 128–138; Macy 2008, 96–105).

In the thirteenth century, arguments against women’s ordination moved from the mere citing of precedents and biblical passages (such as that in which Paul states that women are not to speak in church) to more abstract arguments about the inability to receive the sacrament of ordination in a female body. Eventually, the logic that gained most currency was that which holds that ordinands symbolize Christ when they receive ordination and that women, limited by the weaknesses associated with femininity,

A remarkable difference in the Japanese case is that while certain discourses disparaging the female body did indeed emerge, there was no central authority that systematically linked discourses on the female body to theological arguments about the ordination of women. Nor did Japanese Buddhist authorities use discourses on the female body to write laws that forbade women from preaching or performing rituals. That women’s bodies rendered them unfit for the priesthood may have eventually come to form a kind of “commonsense” knowledge within certain monastic circles, but we do not know of any doctrinal records that articulate this idea in an explicit way. And thus we can observe that while Buddhist and Christian discourses gave rise to similar rhetoric about the inferiority of the female body, they defined the terms of women’s inclusion and subordination in very different ways.

Buddhist nuns in premodern Japan faced obstacles on the path to ordination, as well as limited opportunities for monastic and scholarly training, but the question of whether or not nuns could teach or perform rituals emerges neither in the literature of Saidaiji nor in that of Hokkeji. Indeed, in the early Japanese state nuns were given roles very similar to those of male monks and priests and should thus be viewed as nun-priests: they performed official rites on behalf of the state, ministered to the sick, and carried out ceremonies for laypeople of both sexes. Nuns who executed priestly duties disappeared after the ninth century, when the state stopped offering women formal ordination, but lay and other types of privately professed nuns continued to preach and to conduct rituals, though in unofficial capacities. When monastic ordinations for women became common again from the time of Hokkeji’s medieval restoration, nuns were once more able to serve in priestly roles. They did not have the visibility or numbers of male monastics, but there appears not to have been any widespread resistance to nuns who offered ritual services for lay patrons, performed ceremonies open to the public, or taught lay pilgrims. The warrior government even came to employ some medieval nuns—or nun-priests—in rites meant to protect the state from foreign invasion and to heal illnesses within the shogunal family. Chapter 6 will consider the ritual activities of Hokkeji and other medieval nuns in greater depth.

Another important issue worth clarifying here is that, as a rule, Buddhist nuns were not cloistered. Although there is ample evidence to suggest that, especially in the late medieval period, certain aristocratic and elite warrior families in Japan did send daughters to convents in order to maintain control over family wealth or because marriage partners of suitable standing were in short supply, women sent to convents were by no means forbidden from interacting with the outside world. Despite the fact that Buddhist monasticism, like Christian monasticism, requires celibacy of its monks and nuns (at least in theory), Buddhist groups in Japan did not idealize virginity or even chastity as a broad social value for women. It did
become increasingly common, from the twelfth century or so, for widows to take vows as a way of displaying faithfulness to their husbands, but what was emphasized here was loyalty to the family group rather than sexual fidelity (Katsuura 1995, 102). There is also much Buddhist literature that advises monks to avoid interaction with women, but there is little evidence that Buddhist nuns, like Christian nuns, were cloistered in order to protect their own sexual purity or that of the male orders.22

This contrast did not go unnoticed by early groups of Westerners visiting East and Central Asia. The Portuguese Jesuit Luís Fróis (1532–1597), who arrived in Japan in 1563, observed that while Christian nuns (“our nuns”) were expected to stay within their convents, Japanese bikini were “going out at all times” of the day and night, sometimes even visiting battlefields.23 Similarly, English diplomat Samuel Turner (1749?–1802), who visited Tibet in the late eighteenth century, seemed surprised by the fact that Buddhist nuns there were allowed male visitors: “Though nuns, the admission of male visitors among them during the day, is not prohibited.”24 In the case of Hokkeji, too, we will see that nuns interacted with men—monks from Saidaiji, men from court, and male patrons—on a regular basis.

Like nuns in the Christian West, bikini at Hokkeji left home, took vows, and lived in a religious community. In this sense, “nun” is the English term that best approximates their social position. But I use the term only with the qualifications mentioned above, namely, that Buddhist nuns at Hokkeji and other medieval convents were not cloistered and that these nuns were not theologically barred from performing priestly roles in their communities.

**Overview**

This book is divided into seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 1 treats the history of Hokkeji from its initial decline in the Heian period through the various periods of neglect and semirevival it endured over the course of the Heian period and finally leading up to the years immediately preceding its large-scale revival in the mid-thirteenth century. Against previous studies (in Japanese) that have attributed Hokkeji’s revival to the work of the priest Eison, this chapter traces Hokkeji’s emergence in travel records from the early twelfth century and demonstrates how Hokkeji’s restoration was rooted in the expansion of Nara pilgrimage routes during the late Heian period. Drawing on engi and other popular narratives associated with Hokkeji, I illustrate how nuns staying at Hokkeji during the early years of the Kamakura period used miraculous legends associated with Kōmyō to attract visitors and revitalize the convent. In approaching the story of Hokkeji’s medieval revival from this angle, we are able to see that the reemergence of convents during this period was not simply the result of certain doctrinal innovations, such as those offered by Eison, which allowed for the ordination of women. Certain lay practices visible on the ground—such as pilgrimage to sites associated with legendary figures from Japan’s
past and the spread of *engi* and other popular religious literature—played key roles in the successful restoration of Hokkeji and other convents.

Chapter 2 focuses on individual women involved in the medieval restoration of Hokkeji. One of the most visible accomplishments of Hokkeji’s medieval revival was the reinstitution of an ordination platform for nuns. Both this chapter and the one that follows seek to uncover how various communities surrounding Hokkeji understood the ordination of women, the problem of women’s salvation, and the place of women in the Buddhist order during this period. Here, I am particularly concerned with understanding views of women and Buddhism popular in court society, for among the first rectors at the revived Hokkeji were a number of women who had served as ladies-in-waiting at court.

Chapter 3 contrasts courtly views of women and Buddhism with those widespread among male monastic groups. In this chapter, I examine how the monastic order viewed women and problems surrounding their ordination during the years preceding Eison’s decision to create an ordination platform for women at Hokkeji in the 1240s. I begin with examples from monastic literature in which certain unorthodox priests—iconoclasts like Dōgen (1200–1253) and Myōe (1173–1232, also Kōben)—criticized the Tendai-Shingon orthodoxy for pandering to elite female patrons while failing to offer women official ordination. I then develop an examination of these critical comments into a larger argument about the ways in which women’s ordination fit in to early-Kamakura-period debates about the authenticity of Japanese Buddhism vis-à-vis that practiced in China.

In chapter 4, I delve into Hokkeji’s relationship with Eison and his widely popular movement to revive both the Ritsu school itself and the monastic practice of upholding the *vinaya* laws more broadly. The chapter begins with a summary of Eison’s movement and a discussion of its significance in the religious landscape of Kamakura-period Japan. It goes on to explain how Eison and his disciples envisioned the role of Hokkeji and its nuns in the Ritsu order and to explore the details of how, exactly, Eison implemented Ritsu practices and teachings at Hokkeji. It further examines the question of whether or not Hokkeji nuns were under the management of Saidaiji monks during this period. Finally, the chapter argues that the relationship between Eison and his female followers, including both Hokkeji nuns and laywomen associated with Hokkeji or other temples, exemplified a new, distinctly Kamakura model of how monks were to interact with female followers.

Chapter 5 examines social and economic life at Hokkeji during the heyday of its medieval restoration. During the late thirteenth century, women came to Hokkeji from provinces near and far not only as world renouncers seeking ordination and monastic training but also as lay devotees, pilgrims, and patrons of ritual services. This chapter looks at the social composition of both those groups that took up residence at the convent and those brought to Hokkeji through networks of pilgrimage and patronage. Chapter 6 pursues similar issues but focuses in particular on the ritual programs
in place at medieval Hokkeji. Close analysis of the *Hokke metsuzaiji nenjū gyōji* (Yearly events of the Lotus Temple for the Eradication of Transgressions), a lengthy ritual calendar from medieval Hokkeji, allows us to catch a glimpse of the daily liturgies and annual events that shaped everyday life at Hokkeji. Donor names included in the document also help us to better understand how ritual events held at the convent enabled Hokkeji nuns to gain the support of local laypeople.

Having examined the Hokkeji restoration from these numerous perspectives, I turn, in the final chapter, to consider how women and men involved in the convent’s restoration articulated their views on the nature of women, their salvation, and their roles in the Buddhist community. Chapter 7 examines the degree to which literature composed by the Hokkeji nuns’ community bypasses, or “talks past,” the androcentric rhetoric espoused by Ritsu monks. Reading the literature of the male Ritsu community against that written by Hokkeji nuns, I suggest that Hokkeji nuns chose whenever possible to preserve a less doctrinal, more lay-oriented approach to salvation that downplayed soteriological obstacles related to the female body and focused instead on the saving power of their venerated patron goddess, Queen-Consort Kōmyō. I also examine representations of the nuns’ order and its place in the Ritsu hierarchy, paying particular attention to the degree to which monks and nuns employed different language when describing the place of women in the order. While the members of the monks’ order made it clear that they envisioned themselves as the stewards of the nuns’ order, Hokkeji nuns barely mentioned Ritsu monks. Their texts hold Queen-Consort Kōmyō—and not any monk or group of monks—to be the leader of the nuns’ order. Moreover, while monks tended to ground their views in scholarly and doctrinal texts, the nuns of Hokkeji focused instead on certain parallels between court life and life in the convent. Building on idealized views of the bygone Heian-era court, the nuns suggested that the venerated traditions of the old court survived in the daily activities of Hokkeji and in the memory of Kōmyō preserved there.

The book closes with a brief epilogue that reflects upon the place of Hokkeji and its medieval restoration in the wider history of women’s religiosity in premodern Japan. It further considers the implications of this study for the field of Japanese Buddhism more broadly.