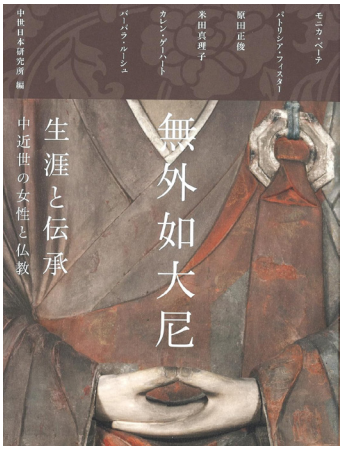
Book Review



Medieval Japanese Studies Institute 中世日本研究所, ed. *Mugai Nyodai: The Woman Who Opened Zen Gates* 無外如大尼　生涯と伝承: 中近世の女性と仏. Kyoto: Shibunkaku Publishing Co. 思文閣出版, 2024. 448 pp.

Mugai Nyodai: The Woman Who Opened Zen Gates brings together an impressive array of scholarly expertise in Japanese Buddhist history, art history, historical textile analysis, and cultural and literary studies. The book was produced to coincide with the eight hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Rinzai 臨済 Abbess Mugai Nyodai 無外如大 (1223–1298). The central aim of the book is to provide an accurate account of Mugai Nyodai and her legacy by separating historical and fictional strands that became entangled over the centuries. Nyodai was long believed to have been a daughter of the Adachi 足立 warrior family, to have studied Zen in Kamakura, and to have recorded her enlightenment under the childhood name of Chiyono 千代野. Despite Barbara Ruch's early identification of historical inconsistencies in this account, the narrative has endured.[1] *Mugai Nyodai* offers a critical corrective by elucidating Nyodai's biography and clarifying its conflation with that of the nun Mujaku 無著 (ca. 1250–1317) and the fictional character Chiyono.

[1] Ruch, 'The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan', 504.

The six chapters examine a wealth of primary source materials dating from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, including land donation documents, letters, diaries, recorded sayings (*goroku* 語録), memorial and eulogy records, convent and temple records, and biographies. Entries are transcribed in the original in the Japanese section of the book and translated in the English section. Visual culture, including painted and sculpted portrait images, textiles, calligraphy, and other temple treasures, is also critically considered.

In Chapter One, 'Mugai Nyodai and Keiaiji', Harada Masatoshi reevaluates Nyodai's biography through meticulous analyses of extensive primary source materials. Although dense, the chapter is highly rewarding. Harada establishes that Nyodai belonged to the Kyoto nobility, likely connected to the Saionji 西園寺 and royal households. While earlier studies postulate that Nyodai travelled to Kamakura to study under the Chinese émigré Rinzai priest Mugaku Sogen (Ch. Wuxue Zuyuan 無学祖元, 1226–1286), founder of the Bukkō 仏光 school of Zen, Harada clarifies that her exchanges with the master were conducted through letters—a common practice at that time. In his view, Nyodai's founding of Shōmyakuin 正脈院 as a memorial temple for Mugaku, as stipulated in his final testament, stands as one of her most significant achievements because it established her as Mugaku's Dharma heir. Equally important was her founding of Keiaiji, later designated as head of the Five Mountains convents (*amagozan* 尼五山) in Kyoto. Harada's discussion of the transmission of Nyodai's *kesa* 袈裟, left to her by Mugaku along with his portrait, reveals the development of a distinct Nyodai lineage at Keiaiji. The chapter concludes with Harada's analysis of Keiaiji's development in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, highlighting its connections to the Ashikaga 足利 bakufu's policy on Zen temples and its successive abbesses.

In Chapter Two, 'Mugai Nyodai: Literary and Material Traces from Her Time', Monica Bethe traces Nyodai's spiritual development through a chronological reading of documents dating from 1265 and 1397. The earliest of these, bearing Nyodai's stylized signature (*kaō* 花押), is a letter encouraging the recipient to continue striving 'to penetrate the principles of Zen' (69)—words that exemplify the teaching of a mature Zen master. Although Bethe

is cautious in attributing the letter definitively to Nyodai, the fact that Mugaku charged Nyodai 'to teach in my place' (73) and that at her cremation in 1298 the Rinzai priest Muzō Jōshō 無象静照 (1234–1306) eulogized her for 'spread[ing] the teachings like [the Tang-era nun] Moshan' (74) attest to the high regard in which her teaching was held. Bethe then examines two *kesa* associated with Nyodai. By comparing the weave and the persimmon calyx (*kaki no heta* 柿の蔕) pattern of the silk of the first *kesa* with extant silks from Southern Song-era (1127–1279) tombs, she confirms its Southern Song provenance. A second *kesa* associated with Nyodai, made of silk with a peony motif, exemplifies the typical style of Mugaku's Bukkō school but differs from Song-dynasty silks. Bethe therefore reasons that Mugaku brought the first *kesa* with him from China when he emigrated to Japan in 1279, and that this is the *kesa* he later passed on to Nyodai. It was a delight to follow Bethe's meticulous historical textile analysis. I was particularly intrigued by her observation that the transmission of *kesa* from China 'tied the recipient to the larger world of Chan/Zen' (79) in East Asia. I would have liked to read more on this topic, but I recognize that it lies beyond the scope of the book.

In Chapter Three, 'Mujaku: A Woman in Her Own Right', Karen Gerhart reconstructs the biography of the nun Mujaku. Despite the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the documentary record and the absence of surviving material traces, Gerhart succeeds in compiling a surprisingly detailed account of Mujaku. Her analysis of *Shijuin okibumi* 資寿院置文 [Shijuin Inheritance Document], compiled by Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351) in 1349, reveals that Mujaku was the daughter of Adachi Yasumori 安達泰盛 (1231–1285) and wife of Kanesawa (Hōjō) Akitoki 金沢(北条)顕時 (1248–1301), both prominent figures in the Kamakura government. According to this record, Mujaku studied under Mugaku Sogen—the one element of her life that overlaps with that of Mugai Nyodai. Gerhart's close reading of donation letters and other documents mentioned in *Shijuin okibumi* brings into focus the network of historical figures connected to Mujaku in both Kamakura and Kyoto. For example, Mujaku's daughter married into the Ashikaga family and gave birth to a son who became a stepbrother of the Ashikaga brothers Takauji

尊氏 (1305–1358) and Tadayoshi 直義 (1306–1352). Mujaku traveled to Kyoto, probably after she was widowed, and became involved with Zen practice and Musō Soseki. She later founded Shijuin 資寿院, possibly as a memorial temple for her husband. While later biographers subsumed Mujaku into the more prominent figure of Nyodai, Gerhart persuasively demonstrates that they were in fact two separate people. We have Gerhart to thank for bringing Mujaku's distinct biography to light.

In Chapter Four, 'Venerating Nyodai through Memorial Ceremonies', Patricia Fister argues that commemorative imagery and associated inscriptions and documents were vital in shaping Nyodai's posthumous legacy. Memorials for special commemorations, known as *onki* 遠忌, provided occasions for priests to venerate and eulogize Zen masters and temple founders. While prior research has focused almost exclusively on such memorials for male monastics, Fister deserves recognition for drawing attention to those held for a high-ranking nun. Fister's analysis of the eulogy composed by the Rinzai priest Zekkai Chūshin (1334–1405) for the hundredth anniversary of Nyodai's death focuses on his high praise for Nyodai. I would add that the inclusion of an incense offering (*nenkō* 拈香)—a distinctive Zen ritual element introduced into memorial services by Chinese émigré priests in the thirteenth century—is also noteworthy. Although Fister does not explore this point, it contributes to our broader understanding of the development of Zen memorial culture in the late medieval period. The highlight of the chapter is Fister's thick description of *onki* and detailed analyses of commemorative portrait sculptures and paintings commissioned for Nyodai's centennial and semicentennial memorials between 1697 and 1797. These works vividly demonstrate how 'Nyodai's image...has been constructed and reconstructed over time' (110).

Chapter Five, 'A Critical Analysis of the Formation of the Mugai Nyodai Biography' by Yoneda Mariko, complements Harada and Gerhart's chapters by explaining how details from the life of Mujaku and the fictional Chiyono were incorporated into the biography of Nyodai. Yoneda overturns earlier scholarship that dated the creation of the Nyodai biography to before the fifteenth century, critiquing scholars' reliance on the *Enpō dentōroku* 延宝伝灯録 [Enpō-era

Record of the Transmission of the Lamp] compiled by Mangen Shiban 卍元師蚾 (1626–1710) in 1678. Instead, she traces the creation of Nyodai's biography to *Seizan Keiai niji Nyodai Zenji shōden* 西山景愛尼寺如大禅師小伝 [Short Biography of Nyodai Zenji, Founder of Seizan Keiai Convent], composed two years earlier in 1676 by Tenryūji 天龍寺 abbot Korin Chūken 虎林中虔. Her conclusion is based on meticulous comparison of drafts and extant versions of the Short Biography. Of particular interest is Yoneda's analysis of *Chiyono monogatari* 千代野物語 [Tale of Chiyono], a fourteenth-century tale that by at least the fifteenth century was widely read as an exemplar of female enlightenment through Zen practice. This leads Yoneda to question what kind of Zen Nyodai actually practiced. As Yoneda points out, Zen was deeply entangled with Tendai 天台 esotericism in the thirteenth century. While Nyodai was indeed a Dharma heir in the Bukkō school of Rinzai Zen, she also studied with Enni Bennen 円爾弁円 (1202–1280), who integrated Zen with esoteric elements. By separating the Chiyono legend from Nyodai's historical biography, Yoneda gestures towards a fresh re-evaluation of Nyodai's Zen.

In Chapter Six, 'Tokugon Rihō and the Legacy of Mugai Nyodai', Monica Bethe and Patricia Fister examine the revival of Nyodai's legacy by Tokugon Rihō 徳厳理豊 (1672–1745), a royal nun and twenty-second abbess of Hōkyōji. In 1711, the Ōbaku 黄檗 priest Daizui Dōki 大随道機 (1652–1717) certified Rihō's awakening, praising her in verse for 'manifesting a vital Zen activity rivaling that of Abbess Mugai' (135). As the authors observe, Daizui and other Zen priests likely drew their view of Nyodai as an accomplished Zen master from her biography in *Enpō dentōroku*. Inspired by Daizui's verse, Rihō determined to write her own Nyodai biography, which she completed in 1713. Bethe and Fister note its many parallels with a copy of *Seizan Keiai niji Nyodai Zenji shōden* preserved at Hōkyōji. This section dovetails effectively with Yoneda's chapter, showing how these biographical texts continued to shape Nyodai's reception into the early modern period. The chapter also details Rihō's broader efforts to preserve and promote Nyodai's legacy, including her organisation of convent records, her self-portrait, the renovation of temple structures, and the donation of ritual objects. What emerges

is a picture of a highly motivated and devoted abbess, deeply inspired by her spiritual affinity with Nyodai. Of particular interest is the authors' discussion of *Kochō no yumegatari* 胡蝶の夢語 [The Tale of a Butterfly's Dream], a text Rihō wrote in 1737 for her thirteen-year-old successor, the royal princess nun Richō 理長 (1725–1764). This instructional work, which outlines daily, monthly, and annual rituals and observances alongside teachings on the precepts and *zazen*, provides invaluable insight into the rhythms and structures of life in a Rinzai Zen convent in the early eighteenth century. As Bethe and Fister show, Rihō's life works reflect her deeply felt karmic link with Nyodai and a commitment to sustaining her spiritual lineage.

The volume concludes fittingly with an afterword by Barbara Ruch, entitled 'Righting Wrongs: The Joys of Unraveling the Story of Nyodai's Life'. In it, Ruch reflects on her longstanding engagement with Nyodai and the challenges involved in recovering women's histories within premodern Japanese Buddhism.

Mugai Nyodai makes a significant contribution to Nyodai studies, women's religious history, and monastic studies. It joins Lori Meeks' *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan* (2010), Caitlin J. Griffiths' *Tracing the Itinerant Path: Jishū Nuns of Medieval Japan* (2016), and Karen Gerhart's edited volume *Women, Rites, and Ritual Objects in Premodern Japan* (2018) in furthering the scholarly path pioneered by Barbara Ruch with her seminal edited volume *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan* (2002).[2] These studies, including the current volume, are all animated by a keen interest in nuns as distinct religious figures in and contributors to Japanese Buddhism. Earlier scholarship—particularly in Japan—often framed women as limited by their biological sex and reliant on male monastics for salvation. In contrast, these more recent works emphasize women's active agency in renouncing the world, seeking ordination, striving for enlightenment, and leading religious communities despite the androcentric views of most of their male contemporaries. As this book makes abundantly clear, Mugai

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[2] For an overview of studies of women in Japanese Buddhism, see Simpson, 'Women', 257–66.

Nyodai exemplified such self-determination.

The book's elegant presentation also merits comment. It is fully bilingual, opening from the left for English readers and from the right for Japanese readers. It is printed on high-quality, soft white matte paper and bound with codex binding (*kodekkususō* コデックス装), which allows the book to lay flat when open—an extremely helpful feature when viewing the many full-colour, double-page reproductions of primary source documents. The *obi* 帯, a paper band akin to a dust jacket, features a detail from the Shinnyoji 眞如寺 portrait sculpture of Nyodai, showing her hands folded in the meditation mudra against the rich browns and rusts of her robes and *kesa*. The deliberate omission of her head on the *obi* seems to gesture toward the central question of the book and invites the reader to encounter Mugai Nyodai within its pages.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Mugai Nyodai or the broader history of Buddhist nuns and convents. It not only achieves its aim of clarifying Nyodai's biography but also provides a richly textured account of her legacy from the medieval through the early modern periods. The exemplary analyses of textual and visual sources make it a valuable resource for scholars and advanced students in fields related to premodern Japanese Buddhism.

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