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Review: Hokkeji And The Reemergence Of Female Monastic Orders In Premodern Japan

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**HOKKEJI AND THE REEMERGENCE OF FEMALE MONASTIC ORDERS IN
PREMODERN JAPAN.** By Lori Meeks. Kuroda Studies in East Asian Buddhism, 23.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. \$50.00.

On the surface this work is a conventional study of a historic but relatively small Buddhist institution, the Hokkeji convent, in medieval Japan. In actuality it offers a window into the multifaceted world of medieval Nara temples. In Western scholarship Nara Buddhism has languished in the shadows of the larger traditional schools—Tendai and Shingon—and the so-called reformed movements—Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren. This work suggests that Nara Buddhism had greater influence and staying power in medieval Japan than was previously recognized. Moreover, Nara Buddhism seemed to be marching to its own drum in formulating belief and piety, taking Chinese models as its inspiration in ways that Tendai and Shingon did not.

More importantly, this study shows that female clerics were able to take charge of their religious affairs and to construct a meaningful and powerful religious identity apart from the interpretations and supervisory intrusions of male clerics. Meeks argues that there were multiple discourses on women in Buddhism circulating in medieval Japan and that patriarchal doctrine was not necessarily dominant in all situations. She demonstrates with extensive documentation and persuasive argument that there was a widespread tendency to “talk past” patriarchal discourses in many settings. Though such discourses did not disappear, they were nonetheless managed and circumvented by women in various ways. This study will become a standard reference on the topic of women in medieval Japanese Buddhism for years to come.

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