

<BOOK REVIEWS>Women, Rites, and Ritual Objects  
in Premodern Japan Edited by Karen M. Gerhart

著者	KIM Jung Hui
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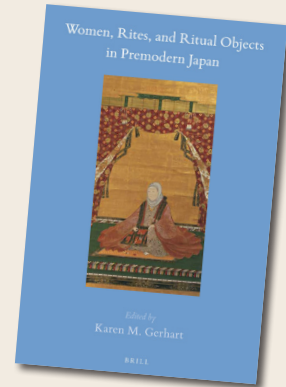
## BOOK REVIEW

### *Women, Rites, and Ritual Objects in Premodern Japan*

Edited by Karen M. Gerhart

Brill, 2018  
xxiii + 411 pages.

Reviewed by Jung Hui KIM



*Women, Rites, and Ritual Objects in Premodern Japan*, edited by Karen M. Gerhart, brings together ten scholarly essays that were originally presented at a workshop held at the University of Pittsburgh in 2015. Ten distinguished researchers from a wide range of disciplines—history, art history, cultural history, and religion—collaborated to shed new light on the lives of Japanese women, the subject of which has not been dealt with enough in scholarship. The book consists of four sections: “Rituals Related to the Household and Childbirth” (part I), “Women and Buddhist Rituals and Icons” (part II), “Buddhist Women and Death Memorials” (part III), and “Female Patronage, Portrait, and Rituals” (part IV). Each section examines the rites practiced for and by women, inspects the ritual objects that women sponsored and used, and thereby unearths their crucial roles as main agents in some historical events covering a long time-span from the Heian to the Edo periods.

Part I includes essays by Gerhart, Anna Andreeva, and Naoko Gunji. In chapter 1, Gerhart introduces the “house move-in ritual,” the yin-yang (*onmyōdō*) practice called *shintaku ishi*, and illuminates the importance of women’s participation in this ritual that is performed to soothe potential evil spirits believed to exist in empty houses. By analyzing *Gushi nintai sanshō himitsu hōshū*, one of the earliest Japanese Buddhist texts on pregnancy and childbirth, Andreeva traces in chapter 2 the historical development of the devotion to Kariteimo (Sk. Hārītī), a female deity who oversees fertility and delivery, and explains the religious background for its popularity. In chapter 3, Gunji takes a detailed look at *Sankaiki*, the diary of Nakayama Tadachika (1131–1195), and reconstructs the actual circumstances of the childbirth of Taira no Tokushi (1155–1213?) and the parturition rites for her.

While the first three essays focus on the rituals associated with women’s living spaces and their bodies, the three chapters in the second part are engaged more with Buddhist rituals, images, and their relations with women as female Buddhist devotees. Chapter 4 by Chari Pradel probes how and why the Buddhist rite of repentance, *Kichijō keka*, began in the Nara period. Analyzing the ritual program of *Kichijō keka* in which Kichijōten, a female deity, plays a central role, Pradel singles out female emperor Kōken-Shōtoku as the figure who initiated the ceremony. In chapter 5, Hank Glassman inspects the *gorintō* (five-elements pagoda) believed to contain the reliquary for the remains of Fujiwara no Kenshi, consort of Retired Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129). The actual *gorintō* is not extant, but Glassman

suggests through an in-depth examination of various written sources that Retired Emperor Shirakawa issued orders for his wife's cremated body to be enshrined in a *gorintō* pagoda, and then dedicated it to the imperial temple of Daigoji to establish a new royal lineage and break away from the political influence of the Fujiwara family. While the previous five chapters revolve around aristocratic women, chapter 6 by Sherry Fowler investigates the religious lives of women from the Edo commoner class. Fowler shows how the temples of the Saigoku Kannon pilgrimage catered to the needs of pregnant women and promoted pilgrimage by women through the production of inexpensive printed texts featuring stories and images of a feminized Kannon.

The two essays by Patricia Fister and Monica Bethe in the third section help readers understand the religious legacy of Zen Buddhist nun Mugai Nyodai. In chapter 7, Fister conducts a meticulous investigation of memorial services for Mugai and her painted and sculptural portraits used in those services, to show how reverence for Mugai lasted for some eight hundred years. Bethe's chapter focuses on two woven surplices believed to be owned by Mugai and transmitted later to Mugai's spiritual successors as contact relics.

The last section deals with female patronage and comprises the two essays by Elizabeth Morrissey and Elizabeth Self. With a detailed visual analysis of the *Illustrated Legends of Ishiyamadera*, Morrissey's chapter identifies a set of white curtains offered by Higashisanjō-in (962–1002), consort of Emperor En'yū (959–991), to a Nyoirin Kannon at Ishiyama Temple, and thereby illuminates her active role as a key patron of ceremonial objects. The last chapter by Self scrutinizes the historical circumstances regarding the commission of the portrait of Jōkō-in (1570–1633). According to Self, Jōkō-in ordered a portrait of herself to be embellished with motifs symbolizing the crest of her natal family, the Asai clan, rather than that of her husband's, the Kyōgoku family. The author claims that the depiction of Jōkō-in as a member of the Asai family was a conscious decision to assert her own lineage as she had failed to produce an heir.

As Gerhart mentions in the introduction, there exists only a small number of book-length studies of women of premodern Japan (p. 2). The publication of this book is a meaningful contribution in itself. Also, each essay in this volume marks a significant achievement, especially in terms of research method. The authors have managed to uncover neglected primary sources and discover the female voice within them. Up until now, a major obstacle in gender history has been the scarcity of these primary documents written by women. The contributors also challenge the commonly accepted views of famous artworks and provide new ways of interpreting them. For example, Gunji compares the painted birth scenes of *Heike monogatari emaki* with textual knowledge of childbirth of the time, thereby questioning the historical accuracy of the images. Pradel's research on *Kichijō keka* illuminates the significance of the Kichijōten statue and thereby provides an alternative way to understand a set of icons enshrined at Horyūji's Golden Hall, which previous studies have interpreted with an emphasis on the Shaka Triad. The excellence of the book finally rests on its attempt to include the lives of anonymous women from the commoner class. Fowler's research, for example, suggests a new way to expand the field to include various aspects of women's lives not recorded in any written texts. Greatly informative and illuminating, the book broadens our understanding of women's lives and opens up new possibilities for a gendered approach to the study of premodern Japan.