Introduction

Why Study Women in Japanese Religions?

In 1911, Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971), one of Japan’s early feminists, wrote in the opening issue of the women’s journal Bluestocking, “In the beginning, woman was the sun. An authentic person. Today she is the moon. Living through others. Reflecting the brilliance of others.”1 Hiratsuka seemed to be alluding to the female gender of the Japanese sun goddess, Amaterasu, who, according to Japanese mythology, ruled over the heavenly plain and established the imperial lineage. Hiratsuka was suggesting that during a primordial age women were once powerful and self-reliant but somehow lost their independence over the course of history. Years later she explained in her autobiography, “To be sure, the sun and the moon symbolized the objective realities of women’s history—the breakdown of a matrilineal society and the rise of a patriarchal system; the tyranny of men and subjugation of women; the gradual decline of a woman’s status as a human being.”2 In 1948 she amended her statement after the promulgation of the new Japanese constitution, which gave women unprecedented equal rights, saying, “Now, thirty-seven years later, I am overjoyed, and want to cry out: ‘Look! The day has come! Now is the time. A big, big sun is shining out from the hearts of Japanese women!’”3

This book is intended as an important corrective to more common male-centered narratives of Japanese religious history. It presents a synthetic long view of Japanese religions from a distinct angle—women’s history—that has typically been discounted in standard survey accounts of Japanese religions. It also provides a framework for existing works on women in Japanese religions, which are usually microhistories and lack
the comprehensive perspective that only the *longue durée* can provide. Despite its focus on women, this volume resists a narrative of mythical independence that is shattered by historical oppression and then, conversely, overturned by modern liberation. Such a narrative is seductive, but ultimately it essentializes the diverse experiences of women of different social backgrounds over the vast span of Japanese history. Instead, this book explores a diverse collection of writings by and about women to investigate the ways ambivalent religious discourses in Japan have not simply subordinated women but also given them religious resources to pursue their own interests and agendas.

Scholars have widely acknowledged women’s persistently ambivalent treatment within the Japanese religious traditions, including Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and new religious movements. In the case of premodern Japanese Buddhism, Bernard Faure, a scholar of religion, has eloquently surveyed and articulated this ambivalence. However, while Faure has rightfully cautioned scholars against idealizing the Buddhist tradition for its egalitarian potential and removing it from the social and historical realities of its Japanese context, his work falls in line with much existing scholarship—particularly Japanese scholarship influenced by Marxist paradigms—that depicts religion as a mere means of oppression, especially for women. This raises the question of how ambivalent and even overtly misogynistic religious discourses on gender have still come to inspire devotion and emulation among women.

As the anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued, universalized assumptions of patriarchal domination have led feminist scholars to question why women “assert their presence in . . . male-dominated [religious] spheres while . . . the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority.” Mahmood contends that it is more useful to explore the matrix of concerns within which women have deployed doctrinal frameworks, networks, and institutions than to conclude that these women have merely internalized “patriarchal norms” — or that
they have become, in Faure's parlance, “the ‘spokespersons’ of a dominantly male tradition.” Dorothy Ko, a historian of China, has made a similar argument, showing that only when women affirm patriarchal values for their own reasons and transmit them to the next generation is their continued implementation guaranteed. The Japanese sociologist Ueno Chizuko likewise has argued that in patriarchal societies, women often support the status quo in hopes of eventually gaining power as the mother of the next patriarch. Thus, “reproduction of the patriarchal system is not possible without the cooperation of women.”

By viewing Japanese religious history through the eyes of women, this text presents a new narrative that offers strikingly different vistas of Japan's pluralistic traditions than the received accounts foregrounding male religious figures and male-dominated institutions. For instance, many traditional versions of Japanese religious history give considerable attention to monastic or priestly lineages, which largely excluded women. Such patriarchal lineages do not play a central role in this book's narrative. It emphasizes instead issues that transcend purely sectarian concerns: female divinities as the embodiments of ideal femininity and sources of political legitimation; changing definitions of female monastic renunciation; female shamans and their links to marginality and political authority; perceptions of women as emblems of defilement and demonic power; the religious implications of the fluctuating definitions of marriage and inheritance rights; and the movement toward and contestations of gender equality in the modern era.

Comprising nine chapters organized chronologically, the survey begins with the archeological evidence of fertility cults in prehistoric Japan and ends with an examination of the influence of feminism and demographic changes on religious practices during the “lost decades” of the post-1990 era. By examining the longue durée of Japanese religions, this book demonstrates that key factors often cited as sources of women's oppression in Japan—for example, the taboos associated with menstrual blood, the patrilineal household, and the exclusion of women from the political sphere—have not been fully hegemonic through all
periods of Japanese history, nor have they been unchanging. In order to avoid essentializing the religious experiences of women across Japanese history, it stresses that there are considerable variations across different time periods in the religious and economic roles of women based on class differences, regional idiosyncrasies, and the diversity of Japan’s religious traditions.

Moreover, this text is not conceived as a narrative of oppressed, passive, weak Japanese women liberated by modern, feminist, Western thought. It not only pays attention to the agency of Japanese women who have resisted, subverted, or actively employed patriarchal ideologies to promote their own interests, but it also includes in its analysis the growing volume of Japanese feminist scholarship on women and religion that has flourished in the aftermath of second-wave feminism in 1970s Japan. As Japan has developed its own feminist movement and has shifted from a predominantly agrarian society to a highly urbanized, industrialized society, religious organizations and religious specialists have struggled to come to terms with changing roles for women—sometimes challenging patriarchal traditions and sometimes embracing traditional gender roles with nostalgia.

Finally, a brief note on Japanese names is also due. Japanese names appear in the customary Japanese order: family name followed by given name. When a person is referred to by a single name, premodern individuals are often referred to by their given name, whereas modern individuals are generally referred to by their surname. This text follows these conventions except in cases in which it is necessary to distinguish between members of the same family.