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Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan: Images of Compassion in the Gyōki Tradition

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Review of *Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan: Images of Compassion in the Gyōki Tradition*

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Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan: Images of Compassion in the Gyōki Tradition. By Jonathan Morris Augustine. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, vii + 174 pages, ISBN 0-415-32245-6 (cloth), US \$170.00.

Religious biographies and hagiographies were dismissed for a long time in Buddhist studies as being too full of the fantastic and miraculous to be any use as historical sources. There is currently, however, a strong interest within wider cultural studies in reading religious hagiography as literature that exposes the socio-political realities of its era, as opposed to simply eulogizing a saint-like figure. Jonathan Morris Augustine's study of the hagiographical tradition of the eighth century Japanese monk Gyōki, *Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan: Images of Compassion in the Gyōki Tradition*, joins a group of excellent recent studies that aim to complicate the usual perception of hagiography. Augustine does so through recognizing the contexts of the texts that make up the corpus of hagiographies of eminent Buddhist practitioners as being eminently important and indicative of wider social realities outside of religious archetypes. This study presents the first specialized work on Gyōki in English. Gyōki

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is a fascinating figure, for he is most renowned as a monk who led the public in works of construction rather than as a meditator or scholar. Today in Japan several of the rest houses he built for commoners traveling to pay tribute at the capital are still extant (6-7).

According to Augustine, however, the depiction of Gyōki as a social worker is just another image in a long line of hagiographical reimaginings. In this study, Augustine takes the reader on a journey through hagiographical works regarding Gyōki from the Nara period through to the present day. In consulting a myriad of sources, including court histories contemporary to Gyōki, later monastic records, and recent Japanese studies of Gyōki, Augustine provides the reader a glimpse of the chronological development of a Japanese Buddhist hagiography. From the outset, the author is not simply concerned with Gyōki as a historical figure, and does not waste space attempting to prove his existence. Instead, he perceives Gyōki's hagiographical corpus as a series of images which reflect more about the age in which they were created than about the original Gyōki (12). This recognition of the fluidity of sacred personality is crucial to understandings of Japanese Buddhism as well as wider religious studies. Through this recognition the human agency involved in the creation of the divine is highlighted, and the real success behind figures such as Gyōki—i.e., their ability to change to become accessible to different social contexts—is reaffirmed. In the process of plotting Gyōki's hagiographical genealogy, Augustine raises many new questions and potentialities for the study of hagiographical texts.

In the Introduction, Augustine sets out a question relevant to many Buddhist figures: how did Gyōki manage to develop such a large hagiographical corpus when he did not himself leave behind any writings? Why does Gyōki continue to inspire Japanese society today even when Buddhism is a minor force in people's lives? (3) Gyōki's corpus does remain an anomaly in the study of Japanese Buddhism due to the unique

nature of his activities. Augustine draws a cross-cultural comparison with Christian ideas of charity in an analysis of how charity and compassion could be read in Gyōki's works.

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter one explores the received hagiographies of Gyōki. Augustine sets out several features of Gyōki's life in chronological order, and explores how in different eras of hagiography these features have been reinterpreted in line with the social realities of the time. Augustine also considers the edict from 717 (found in the *Shoku Nihongi*) that accuses Gyōki of forming "unruly cliques in the streets and inciting commoners to participate in bizarre rituals" (22). He suggests that Gyōki originally distanced himself from mainstream monastic Buddhism at a time when heavy taxes and corvée labour was made compulsory for the general population. Imperial histories show that it was around this time that Gyōki started building halls for people traveling between their villages and administrative centres (25).

Chapter two moves on to explore the bodhisattva rhetoric and its development in the Japanese Buddhist hagiographical corpus, as Gyōki is called a bodhisattva in several of the sources that the author considers. It is in this chapter that Augustine relays most clearly his argument that hagiography can be read by a broader method that reveals important aspects of the society in which it was created. However, the process of separating historicity from fabrication is a complex one. Augustine does well in balancing these aspects of reading in this chapter by thoroughly questioning the archaeological finds of Gyōki's construction sites that supposedly give Gyōki historicity. This chapter also explores the most significant contribution of this study: the importance of recognizing different eras in the development of images and separating these images according to the context in which they were created (46).

In the following chapters, Augustine develops this idea through looking at different aspects of Japanese society contemporary to Gyōki. Augustine argues that construction was a surprising activity for a monk to be involved in during the Nara period due to the implementation of rules for Buddhist monks and nuns, the *Sōniryō*, which minimized the clergy's interaction with commoners by keeping them occupied within their temples or in the capital. Chapter three explores how recent studies in Japanese have focused on the aforementioned 717 imperial edict, which accused Gyōki of causing a commotion by preaching to commoners.

After a rigorous and fascinating overview of how the *Sōniryō* developed in Japan, Augustine explores the punishment system and the status of *shidosō*, unlicensed monks. He writes that in order to understand how Gyōki escaped punishment, we must begin by reassessing the common academic interpretation of popular Buddhism during the Nara period. Previous studies have seen emphasis put on the way in which Buddhism was used as “an exotic source of divine protection for the imperial court as well as a symbolic support for political centralization” (3). However, Augustine sees Nara Buddhism as more multifaceted, and argues that the *Sōniryō* was not so easily and widely implemented as has been suggested and that the precept system was actually difficult to control through centralized authorities (48). As well as there being many other “troublemakers” such as Gyōki on the scene, social upheavals, political crises and pressure on commoners to pay large taxes and perform corvée labour all meant that the legitimacy of the Nara court during the eighth century was not as automatic as assumed in previous studies.

In Chapter four, Augustine writes that the Nara court may have actually borrowed legitimacy from Gyōki, rather than legitimizing him. Here Augustine gives a detailed and nuanced account of the imperial power-plays of Gyōki's era that led to Emperor Shōmu leaving the capital and wandering between different centers. This era also saw the creation

of *Ritsuryō kokku*, Japan's first centralized bureaucracy (64). In this situation, Gyōki's construction works, which included building bridges and making public rest houses, must have alleviated the hardships of the general population considerably as they traveled to the capital to pay tribute. It appeared that the Emperor wanted to capitalize on the popularity brought to Gyōki through such activities. In 745 Gyōki was awarded the highest rank in the Buddhist establishment in Japan, the senior primary prelate (*daisōjō*) (81). Augustine's depiction here of the state borrowing power from a wandering monk is fascinating, and an important point for future studies to explore as well, as it complicates ideas of centralized power through recognizing the agency of local actors, such as Gyōki who appeared peripheral but were actually crucial to include in the imperial hierarchy in order to gain the continued support of the populace.

Chapter five further considers Gyōki's charitable projects, as well as how contemporary Buddhist discourses regarding "the field of merit" and "the three stages" may have influenced Gyōki in his performance of socially productive acts (84). Though Gyōki's acts appeared subversive and quite unique in Japanese history, he was probably only one of many monks engaged in similar acts at the time. Augustine also considers how these subversive acts actually served the state's interest, through channeling the dissatisfaction and frustration of the peasants towards their government into productive construction works which benefited the state's infrastructure (95). This point suggests a difficulty in imagining Gyōki as either a rebel or a saint that worked for the state. It appears he may have been somewhere in between, though different accounts tend to place him in different positions as according to motivations from the author's era. Chapter six takes this point further as Augustine discusses different hagiographical images of Gyōki through time. He shows that early depictions from the *Nihon Ryōiki* and other texts saw Gyōki as a wandering shamanic figure with supernatural powers, whereas by the

Heian period, Gyōki's life was used as fuel to legitimize sectarian debates. This chapter considers other archetypal depictions of Gyōki, as well as the symbiotic relationship between Gyōki and the Emperor (123).

This final chapter highlights the best aspects of this study. Augustine's attention to detail and his use of intricate evidence to support his arguments make *Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan* an intriguing venture into how to read and appreciate Buddhist hagiography. In the conclusion, Augustine considers wider trends in Japanese hagiography, and suggests further research on Gyōki. In the appendix, Augustine provides us with a chronology of different accounts of Gyōki's life from hagiographies written between 749, the year of Gyōki's death, through to 1145. These accounts all differ widely in their depictions of images of Gyōki, and support Augustine's assertion that hagiography read simply as historiography is hagiography wasted.

The nuances and layers provided by an analysis attuned to the wider socio-political and religious contexts in which texts are written make this work a rich account of a religious and socially engaged life. *Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan* sets a new standard for the study of hagiography with its depth of detail and wide reading of evidence in its depiction of the evolution of Gyōki's hagiographies, and is therefore of interest to students of all Buddhist biographical traditions. While considering folk depictions of Gyōki would also have been rewarding, Augustine's analysis of official sources together with religious hagiographical compendiums leaves readers interested in Nara Japan with much to think about as well. The book is well written, though incorporating the titles and an overview of different hagiographies of Gyōki into the introductory chapter would have assisted in presentation of the material, since Augustine jumps between different times and hagiographical presentations throughout the study. However, the originality of this study outweighs any minor structural difficulties. Augustine's perception of the intricacy

cies of power relations of Gyōki's day, and also the power relations embedded in religious texts written about Gyōki in different eras, provide an example of how important hagiography is in understanding power relations in Buddhist societies. Though some details of Gyōki's life remain incomplete, by placing Gyōki into an historical context, Augustine has managed to invoke the complex realities of Nara Buddhism, as well as the creation of an important Buddhist personality.